No. 644.) For Week Ending May 4th, 1901. (One Penny.

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SHORT STORIES

No. 644.] For the Week Ending May 4th, 1901. [ONE PENNY.

# A Keeper of Secrets

By R. NORMAN SILVER.

**Being Days in the Professional Life of the late Mr. Hugo Pontifex, the Famous West-end Solicitor.**

To those who had only met him casually in Society, the late Mr. Pontifex was a good-tempered mystery. Bluff, handsome, and, in spite of his middle-age, a little of a dandy, he seemed the last man in the world to deserve his reputation, which was that of the keenest, most audacious, and unerring of family lawyers. Fair-haired, and powerful as an athlete, his striking appearance was increased by his eyes, one of which was grey and one blue.

In reality, however, Hugo Pontifex had a wide and almost exclusively aristocratic practice. He seldom briefed a barrister, seldom set foot in a court of justice, but single handed he hunted down, captured, and safely buried mystery after mystery of terrible import to Mayfair and Belgravia.

An expert in strangling scandal, he lived a life of enthralling interest, and died a rich man. When his executors went through his papers they found nothing to satisfy their curiosity, though plenty to excite it. Hugo Pontifex knew the value of fire—and the dangers of ink. But from time to time he related to the writer, who enjoyed a certain measure of his confidence, the incidents which form the basis of the following stories. In speaking of these strange fragments of drama, Mr. Pontifex himself employed fictitious names, the present author being left to guess vainly at the identity of the genuine actors.

## HIS GRACE OF DARTMOOR'S DAUGHTER.

"WILL Mr. Pontifex be kind enough to visit, at the above address, Convict James Traill, Number 1357, for a short consultation of the utmost importance? James Traill may remark that the last time he had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Pontifex was in the paddock at Epsom, on the occasion of 'Chrysanthemum's' Derby. He hopes that Mr. Pontifex still has his diamond pin. Inclosed, Mr. Pontifex will find the Home Secretary's authorization for a private interview."

This odd missive was delivered to Hugo Pontifex early in the evening of a summer's day that the great solicitor had spent very pleasantly at Lord's. On his way to dine at the Savoy, he paid a flying visit to his office in St. James Street, and received from his deaf clerk, among other correspondence, a blue official envelope, indorsed, "H.M. Prison, Dartmoor." The same ominous inscription topped the letter-paper on which James Traill had penned his brief but striking note.

Mr. Pontifex sat down, tossed his opera-hat—he had called at his chambers to dress—upon the writing-table beside him, and pondered the epistle. What recollection had he of "Chrysanthemum's" Derby or of the paddock at Epsom on that date? And what did Convict James Traill, No. 1357, mean by that enigmatic reference to Mr. Pontifex's diamond pin?

Suddenly the lawyer snapped his thumb and finger crisply together; he had remembered! Some years before, he had been watching the parade for the classic race in question, when a gloved hand touched him upon the arm and a courteous voice warned him that his diamond pin—a favourite and costly ornament—had loosened from his scarf and was on the point of falling.

Hugo Pontifex had glanced up and then bowed respectfully; the person who had accosted him was a popular sportsman and a peer of the realm. The solicitor boasted a wide circle of distinguished acquaintances—his pin had just been preserved to him by the Duke of Litherland. With a jovial acknowledgment of Mr. Pontifex's thanks and a whispered recommendation, "Have a bit on Chrysanthemum," the Duke had passed by and vanished in the crowd.

The lawyer had risked a trifle on the suggested outsider, which won easily, at twenty to one. This was, then, the entire history of Hugo Pontifex's association with "Chrysanthemum's" Derby.

But what could the Duke of Litherland and Mr. Pontifex's diamond pin possibly have to do with Convict James Traill, of Dartmoor? As the solicitor stated the problem thus precisely, he burst into a low whistle—a characteristic sign of intelligence. After

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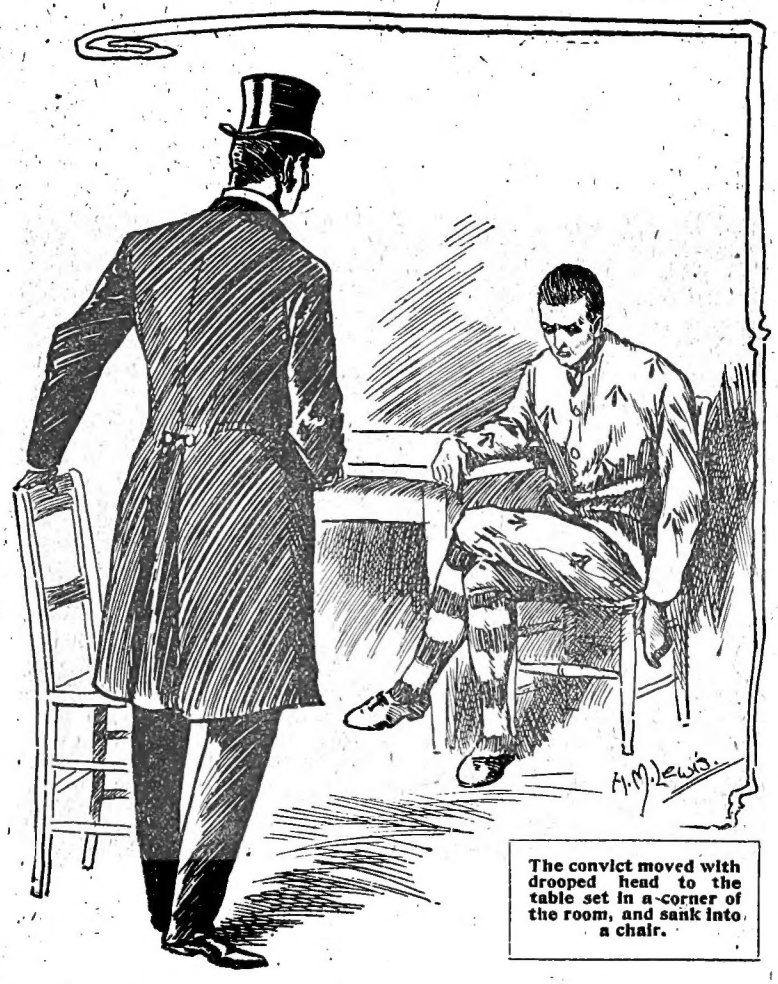
which he caught up his crush-hat, and, bidding his clerk good-night, went on to the Savoy.

At the close of a merry little dinner-party, Hugo Pontifex drove to his rooms in the Albany, changed his costume, and packed a portmanteau. When the late mail for the West of England drew out of Paddington, the lawyer was on board.

By ten o'clock the next morning he was entering the precincts of the huge convict prison on the Dartmoor plateau.

The document transmitted to him by James Traill proved irresistible, and Mr. Pontifex was soon seated in a bare and gloomy apartment, momentarily expecting the arrival of his strange client. Beyond the glass pane of the door a warder marched to and fro, looking in now and again as he paced his beat.




The convict moved with drooped head to the table set in a corner of the room, and sank into a chair.

At length the door was opened, and a powerful figure, of medium height, and wearing the grey and arrow-sprinkled garb of the British convict, advanced towards the solicitor.

"This is Number 1357, sir," said a fresh warder, who had escorted the new-comer.

Mr. Pontifex nodded coolly, and rose from the wooden chair on which he had been lounging. There was the click of a latch and he was alone—with Number 1357.

The lawyer lifted his eyes to the slouching form, and a deep furrow showed itself between his strong brows.

The convict moved, with drooped head, to the table set in a corner of the room, and sank into a chair that brought his back to the glass pane and the sentinel warder. Mr. Pontifex took a seat opposite.

Slowly the prisoner straightened his bent shoulders and the solicitor saw him face to face.

"*Sss-t!*" murmured his client, cautiously; "can you recognise me in this masquerade, Pontifex? I am the Duke of Litherland; did you have anything on 'Chrysanthemum'?"

Hugo Pontifex could not suppress a smile, he had been prepared for the announcement of James Traill's real individuality, and the final clause of the peer's observation tickled him.

"A fiver, at twenty to one," he said, answering the second of the two queries.

The expression on his keen features afforded a sufficient reply to the first.

"I cleared ten thousand over the colt," declared the convict: "heigho, Pontifex, I would give a million for a sniff of the Downs and a glimpse of the crocks at their gallops. But what the dickens am I maundering about; you want to know how I got into this beastly hole, don't you? Well, here goes."

He rested his elbows on the table and propped his shaven chin in his palms.

"To the authorities," he pursued, speaking under his breath, "I am James Traill, cracksman, sentenced twelve months ago at the Old Bailey to five years' penal servitude for breaking into the London residence of the Honourable Lewis Thorne."

"Lewis Thorne!" softly interpolated the lawyer, who was familiar with his Peerage; "he is your nephew, is he not, and heir to the title?"

"Quite so," was the response, "and worst of all, my relentless enemy. He has, however, some excuse for his hatred of me—I killed his brother Bob at a sheep-shearing in Western Australia, when I was Lord Randal Haughton, and travelling, beautifully hard-up, under the alias of James Traill. Bob Thorne was a rival of mine in the affections of a certain lady, I cut him out, he planned to do for me, and I shot him on sight."

"Without taking the precaution to secure proof of his resolve to assassinate you?" surmised Mr. Pontifex.

"You've hit it," said his client mournfully. "Finding that I had committed an error of judgment, I slipped out of the colony, resumed my own name, and got to Melbourne, to learn that my mother's uncle had died and left me an extremely convenient legacy. I returned to Western Australia, and, disguised by smart tailoring and an English drawl, succeeded in winning and wedding, as Lord Randal Haughton, the lady for whose sake I

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had had to give Bob Thorne his quietus. You will not need telling that she knew me to be one and the same with James Traill."

The solicitor was twisting his sapphire ring—in all his chequered experience he had never seen so fantastic a spectacle as that which was presented by this English noble arrayed in the hideous garments of a convict. But the clue to the mystery had not yet manifested itself.

"Ultimately," observed the Duke, "I attained to the dukedom and left the Antipodes for these shores. Then my difficulties commenced; Lewis Thorne was practically a member of my family circle and I could not escape receiving him. He saw the Duchess and was obviously agitated. During my subsequent absence from town he visited her and explained that emotion. He had seen in her the original of a sketch forwarded to him by his brother—a few weeks prior to the latter's death—and purporting to be the likeness of an Australian belle, with whom Bob Thorne confessed himself in love. If my wife could throw any light upon the violent and mysterious end of a man who had loved her devotedly, Lewis Thorne besought her to do so."

The speaker sighed and ran his fingers through his closely-shorn locks.

"I do not blame poor Stella," he added, "she was attacked unawares. But her acute alarm roused Thorne's suspicions instantly, and her terror reached a too suggestive crisis when he asked casually whether I had been in the neighbourhood at the time. From that minute Lewis Thorne was vowed to ascertain my connection with his brother's fate."

Hugo Pontifex listened thoughtfully, his shrewd mind registering every detail in the singular narrative which the convict-duke was unfolding.

"Thorne," said his Grace of Litherland, "following the clue provided by the Duchess, had Australia ransacked, by a brilliant detective, for witnesses who might furnish information as to his brother's friends and pursuits. We heard of the search through my wife's people out there, and I sailed to the Antipodes by the next liner. As an amateur spy I did fairly well, and I satisfied myself that, though evidence of the shooting of Bob Thorne by James Traill existed in plenty, but one shred of proof had survived to demonstrate the identity of James Traill and Lord Randal Haughton. That proof was a photograph of James Traill."

A word dropped from the lawyer's lips—it was the curt commentary, "Dangerous!"

"So I felt," agreed the other; "the photo had been the work of an up-country operator and he and the negative had long since disappeared. Only one solitary print remained, and with it the detective left for England. I pursued—overland—spent money like water, and gained London ahead of him, yet failed in each of a dozen plots to abstract the portrait from its custodian on his arrival. He went safely to his employer's residence and came away, with the air of a contented man. That evening I broke into Thorne's house."

Mr. Pontifex nursed his knee attentively—he was absorbed in the tale.

"By the aid of a dark lantern and a professional 'jemmy,'" said the aristocratic convict, "I tracked the photo to a dispatch-box, got it out and burnt it. In the very act of departure I was surprised by Thorne, who had been wakened by some slight sound of mine. He wore a dressing-gown, and carried a double-barrelled gun, loaded. Hardly had he recognised me in the moonbeams than he fired, point-blank. The bulk of the charge missed, but sufficient pellets peppered my countenance to veil my identity during the trial that ensued. Half-blinded, I was given into custody by the frightened servants, tried with my face in bandages,

"Mr. Pontifex?" she said inquiringly. "I believe you are from Devonshire."

and sentenced to five years, as James Traill—my former alias, was the first that came, indiscreetly, I admit, to my tongue. The punishment was stiff, but Thorne had sworn that I attempted to brain him with the steel crowbar I had been using."

Hugo Pontifex regarded his client pityingly. "So this," he decided, "is the true reason for the rumoured disappearance of the Duke of Litherland, a rumour constantly repeated, and as constantly denied, for the last six months. I am afraid, my dear Duke, I can do nothing for you except assure you of my sincere sympathy."

"I do not wish you to aid myself," said the peer, "at least, not directly. Thorne, at present, is my heir, since my only child is a daughter—Adelaide—by my first wife. The Duchess, who recently paid me—as Mrs. Traill—one of the semi-public visits permitted by the authorities, contrived to make me understand that

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Thorne is appealing to the Courts to be allowed to presume my death abroad. Also he is insisting that he must and will marry Adelaide, doubtless to strengthen his claim to presume my death. Should he be refused, he hints to Stella, he can have a certain James Traill tried, on the expiration of his term, for the murder of one Robert Thorne."

The Duke laid his bowed head upon his arms.

"Poor Adelaide," he muttered; "she loves a gallant fellow—an officer and a gentleman. She must suffer in any event—if she does not marry Thorne and he causes a scandal it will probably break off her match with Captain Carruthers."

The solicitor leant forward and placed a firm hand on the peer's shoulder.

"My dear Duke," he observed; "you have communicated with me none too promptly, yet I can help you, notwithstanding. No legal skill could cancel the sentence which you have incurred by your imprudent raid upon Thorne's dwelling. But, for the other matters, leave them to me. I will checkmate Thorne, save your daughter, and keep your secret."

The Duke wrung the lawyer's brown fingers and gasped an indistinct phrase or two. There were tears in his eyes and on the pale skin, still puckered with the scars of the gun-shot wounds inflicted by Lewis Thorne.

Mr. Pontifex took a melancholy farewell of his client; not till he was out of the depressing shadow of Dartmoor did he breathe freely and display his usual elastic stride.

All through the heat of a glorious June day, Hugo Pontifex journeyed from the West, and when night fell he was driving swiftly between the crowded sidewalks of London. His destination was the Duke of Litherland's town house.

At the portal of a tall mansion in Stratton Street his cab stopped. The lawyer descended, paid the Jehu, pulled the heavy brass bell-handle, and produced his card-case, as the double doors swung inward to reveal the liveried stature of a gigantic footman.

"I wish to see the Duchess, if she is in town," said Hugo Pontifex; "should she be away I would be glad to learn her whereabouts. Here is my card—I am a solicitor and my business is urgent."

The footman accepted the pasteboard; he perceived the easy authority of the visitor's bearing.

"Her Grace dined at home this evening, sir," he replied, "with some friends. I will take in your name, sir, if you will step into the library."

The lawyer permitted himself to be shown to the indicated apartment.

"Tell her Grace," he desired, "that I come from Devonshire." The servant bowed and passed out. Mr. Pontifex lay down upon a comfortable settee; he was tired by his eighteen hours of travel.

Five minutes slipped away, and then the *portière* over the entrance rattled its hangers as a woman, in a trailing dinner-dress of black, came through. She was graceful, dark-eyed, queenly. Hugo Pontifex leapt up.

"Mr. Pontifex?" the wearer of the black gown said, inquiringly; "I believe you are from Devonshire."

There was a pathetic gasp beneath the words, and the speaker's fingers were clutching nervously a lace handkerchief.

"I have just arrived from that county, madam," answered Hugo Pontifex. "I was summoned yesterday to—to Dartmoor, to consult with a client. He has resigned into my care a rather delicate situation, turning upon the attitude of a Mr. Lewis Thorne."

The Duchess of Litherland caught at her white throat; she might have been suffocating with alarm. Mr. Pontifex looked at her, unfalteringly, with his strange, dissimilar orbs.

"Is this bluff—or what?" he cried. "Do you realise that I am not to be trifled with?"

"Trust me, madam," he urged; "I will cut the Gordian knot that is being tied about your step-daughter and yourself. I have merely waited upon you to ask if you will arrange for me to meet, as soon as possible, say, under this roof, and, more or less, as if by accident, the Mr. Lewis Thorne to whom I referred. Unimpeachable witnesses—who should be quite unprepared—should be present."

"Mr. Thorne is in the house now," said Stella, Duchess of Litherland, anxiously.

The pretty Australian was trembling with agitation—it was no wonder that so excitable a creature, with a terrible secret on her innocent mind, should have awakened the suspicions that had borne such deadly fruit.

"Excellent," decided the lawyer; "and the witnesses?"

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"My step-daughter," answered the Duchess, quaveringly, "and Captain Carruthers are also here—they and Mr. Thorne have been dining with me. Mr. Thorne was an uninvited, or, to be frank, a self-invited guest."

"Nothing could be better," said Hugo Pontifex; "let us have them in. But you may think that I ought to have submitted my credentials before this, allow me to do so at once."

He gave her the letter which had been sent to him by "Convict James Traill." The Duchess read it, moving aside to an electric pendant. Mr. Pontifex perceived that she kissed it surreptitiously. He affected not to notice the gesture, and, on regaining possession of the missive, thrust it into his pocket-book.

"I understood my client," he told her, "to say distinctly that Mr. Thorne had already initiated an appeal to the courts for leave to presume your husband's death."

"Yes," responded the peeress, "the application is part heard, and evidence has been lodged, on Mr. Thorne's account, suggesting that the Duke had died lately in America." She lifted her large dark pupils to the solicitor; they had a species of desperation in their lustrous depths.

"It may prove useful to be cognizant of that," said Hugo Pontifex; "but the chief thing is that he has committed himself to the application, and, as a consequence, has filed his affidavits. However, if I may trouble you, I will see Mr. Thorne, your step-daughter, and Captain Carruthers. You might convey to them that I have a message from the Duke himself."

"You are very daring!" ventured the Duchess hesitatingly.

The lawyer smiled. "Audacity is my fort," he declared. The other scanned him critically, but with unmistakable hopefulness, and swept her flowing black skirts from the room.

On her reappearance she was accompanied by a lovely girl, whose blue eyes, dazzling complexion, and wealth of red-gold hair, constituted an admirable foil to the dusky beauty of the Duchess. With the two women was a moustached and stalwart cavalier—to the most superficial glance a soldier in mufti. Behind this trio strolled a spare, short person, whose principal characteristics were a pinched Grecian nose and a glossy brown thatch over hollow temples.

"Lewis Thorne!" said Mr. Pontifex to himself, and he was not in error. The introductions vindicated his discernment. As the group ranged itself round him, the solicitor took up a position whence he could scrutinize Lewis Thorne's selfish features.

"Madam," he began; "I will at once deliver the message which the Duke has been pleased to communicate to me, with the request that I should rehearse it also to Mr. Thorne in the presence of witnesses."

The straight thin mouth of Lewis Thorne shaped itself into a sneer; but he said nothing. Hugo Pontifex watched him narrowly.

"It is this," continued the lawyer. "The Duke wishes me to state that he is by no means dead, and has his own reasons for remaining in strict seclusion. He considers that his absence need not delay the proposed marriage between Lady Adelaide and Captain Carruthers. His Grace prefers, indeed, that it should be solemnized at an early date."

The solicitor's eagle glance marked the flush of happy colour in Lady Adelaide's fair face, and marked, too, that the gallant Captain drew nearer to the lovely girl with whom his name had been coupled.

Mr. Pontifex's attention was abruptly diverted to Lewis Thorne; that gentleman had stridden forward, and was glaring insolently at the lawyer.

"Is this bluff—or what?" he cried: "do you realise that I am not to be trifled with."

"Neither am I," said Hugo Pontifex calmly; "Lady Adelaide—Captain Carruthers—my respectful felicitations."

"A truce to compliments!" hissed Lewis Thorne; "or, if Carruthers has a fancy for pretty speeches, I'll make him one. You've been told to play high, my man of law—well, I'll raise the limit. My dear Carruthers, your future wife's papa is, of all places in the world, at Dartmoor."

The Captain stared amazedly at the author of this intimation.

"You seem to be familiar with the Duke of Litherland's motions," said Mr. Pontifex, flinging a dash of contempt into his voice; "how long have you known, pray, that he was at Dartmoor?"

As the solicitor put this question he drew himself together for one of those disconcerting pounces peculiar to him, and which always betokened the crisis of his diplomacy.

"Meddling fool," snarled Lewis Thorne; "why, for twelve months; ever since he ——"

"Ever since he set sail for the mine," whipped in the lawyer; "you are better informed than I imagined, Mr. Thorne. By the way," he lowered his tone to a whisper and approached Lewis Thorne with a single swift pace; "do you understand that the penalty for filing a false affidavit may be seven years' penal servitude? In order to commence your application to the Courts you had to swear that to the best of your knowledge and belief the Duke of Litherland was dead, and now, before witnesses, you have just admitted yourself guilty of perjury in making that statement. Beware!"

"Excuse me," said Captain Carruthers, as the solicitor stepped back to that officer's side; "but is it indiscreet to inquire if the Duke is really detained abroad by his mining interests?"

Hugo Pontifex nodded mysteriously. "His Grace," murmured the solicitor, "may be away for some years. But not a syllable to anyone, Captain Carruthers; I must not even tell you where the mine is. Mr. Thorne has only heard its name—oddly enough, it is called the 'Dartmoor.' There was some report of an accident to the Duke, that, no doubt, misled Mr. Thorne into his imprudent legal action, which, of course, he will pursue no further."

A sigh of relief fell on the lawyer's ear—Stella, Duchess of Litherland, had turned to the door in time to see the vanishing figure of Lewis Thorne.

* * * * *

And this is the explanation of the fact that, upon the discharge of James Traill, Number 1357, from a Devonshire convict establishment, that personage hastened to America, bought a costly copper mine, christened it the "Dartmoor," and returned to England as the clever and aristocratic mining expert, his Grace the Duke of Litherland.

But Captain Carruthers insisted upon dubbing his father-in-law the Duke of Dartmoor, to the amusement of Lady Adelaide Carruthers and the secret horror of the Duchess. As for Lewis Thorne, he uttered no opinion on the subject, the possibility of seven years for perjury being a most effective muzzle.

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# . . A . .
# GOOD SLATING.

"An enemy has done this," muttered Hamo Ibbetson looking up with a haggard face from the paper he was reading.

"What's the excitement, old cock?" elegantly inquired Freddie Mostyn, the barrister, stretching his long legs towards the studio fire, and turning a good-humoured, freckled face on his friend.

In answer the latter tossed him the paper, first indicating with his thumb an article headed "The Ibbetson Exhibition." The barrister took the crackling sheet and began to read, while Ibbetson with his chin on his fists, stared gloomily into the purring, snapping flames.

Hamo Ibbetson was one of those unhappy people who mistake intense love of an art for ability to excel in it. Full of enthusiasm and perseverance, but totally lacking in inspiration or executive skill, they will plod on doggedly and hopefully for a whole life-time, turning out with monotonous, pitiful regularity, the most woeful failures, and never advancing one step in their ill-chosen line.

In painting, in literature and in music these unfortunates are too pitifully abundant; and after a life of disappointment, they fall asleep murmuring that they have been misunderstood—neglected—unappreciated.

All the time they are totally oblivious of the fact that they never have produced—more, never will, and never can produce—one line, one brisk stroke, or one bar worth a moment's consideration. In one word, Ibbetson was a hopeless duffer.

With strong, native commonsense, old John Ibbetson, the millionaire brass founder of Birmingham, had strenuously fought against his son's infatuation for painting, until he at last resolved to (as he said) "let the young fool see he's no good at it."

To this end he consented to Hamo's abandoning the parental counting-house where he had been placed to gain an insight into "the business," and attending for several terms the magnificent Municipal School of Art.

Here, even the caustic criticisms of the foremost art teacher in England did not open the young man's eyes, and with hope and enthusiasm unabated, he went to Paris for a year and studied with Julien. He never realised that the master's grave "*Continuez, m'sieu'*," covered a sense of the helplessness of ever implanting any idea of drawing in the English pupil with the curly brown head and the earnest eyes.

An often expressed intention to cause some stir in art circles in England, resulted in a "one-man exhibition" in Bond Street, funds for the purpose being provided from Birmingham, when Ibbetson *père* watched the progress of events with humorous resignation.

The papers were not kind to the Ibbetson Exhibition, but if the big dailies chastised the ambitious young man with whips, the newly-started *Review of the Day* which had already made a name for vitriolic criticism employed scorpions.

"By Jove, old chap, what a savage sort of sportsman this writer-animal must be! Doesn't he pitch into you, though!" cried Freddie Mostyn, when he had come to the end of the article.

There was a look of pain in Ibbetson's dark eyes as he replied:

"It's simply a mean act of personal revenge! I must have unconsciously offended the man somehow, somewhere. Let's see, though," he picked up the paper again, "it's signed 'W.H.' but I don't seem to remember the initials. What an atrocious thing to do, though, anyhow! The other paper said I couldn't paint, but they didn't say it quite so brutally as this Johnnie. What shall I do about it?"

"Take no notice," said Mostyn, the cautious.

"What a cold-blooded animal you are!" cried the painter. "How can I sit still under an attack evidently made through personal malice. It's libellous, isn't it?" he added hopefully.

"Technically, all criticism is libellous," said the barrister, "but you couldn't get damages for that.

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Don't make yourself a laughing stock, old chap. Sit down and have another whisky-and-soda."

"I know what I will do!" said Ibbetson, "I'll give the cad the best thrashing he ever had in his unnatural life."

"Don't be an ass," said Mostyn placidly.

"It's all very well for you," cried his friend fiercely. "Nobody's trodden on your corns. Hang it, I can't sit here doing nothing. I'm off to Fleet Street."

He got up, and assumed hat and coat. He likewise took a serviceable walking-stick.

Mostyn viewed these preparations with visible uneasiness.

"Mark you, I'm not going to bail you out, you know," he observed, shaking a judicial forefinger at his fiery friend.

The latter merely laughed grimly, and in a few moments a swift hansom was speeding him Citywards.

* * * *

The more Hamo Ibbetson thought of the obnoxious criticism the angrier he got.

"Such a mean thing to do!" he kept repeating to himself complainingly, "such a very mean thing to do! I wouldn't do a thing like that—hang it!"

A grimy boy answered to his knock at the little window marked "Inquiries" when he had reached the office of the *Review of the Day*.

"Want to see the editor? Ain't in," observed this youth carelessly. "The assistant-editor's in, though."

"Then I'll see him," said Ibbetson, with determination.

"Where's yer card!" demanded the grimy one severely.

Ibbetson, abashed, produced the desired article. Presently the boy emerged from the editor's room, and remarked with condescension:

"Go in, will yer?" with a nod towards the inner apartment.

The room was apparently empty when Ibbetson entered it.

"I want to see the assistant-editor," said he, with a sense of the absurdity of thus addressing the empty air.

There arose from behind a big desk, the slight figure of a girl. She was attired neatly in black, with austere white collar and cuffs, and her sunny hair was severely dressed close to her small, high-bred head. She regarded Ibbetson gravely.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Are you the assistant-editor?" he stammered, hiding the serviceable walking stick behind him.

"Yes," said the girl, with a quiet smile. "I am the assistant-editor, *pro. tem.* What can I do for you?"

"I—er, rather wanted you to tell me," said the artist slowly, "the name of your art-critic."

"We never disclose the name of any one on our staff," said the girl.

"I want to know this for a particular reason."

"Your reasons don't matter to me," retorted the journalist. "Our rule is not to be broken."

"A very particular reason," persisted the young man.

"I can guess what it is," said the girl calmly. "You wish to remonstrate with him on the article in this week's number."

"A base and cowardly attack!" broke in Ibbetson hotly. "I can only imagine that the man has a grudge against me for some reason or other."

"Well, for once I'll break our rule," said she, with a flash of scorn in her eyes.

"The writer," remarked the girl, "had never seen you till—I mean, had never seen you when that criticism was done."

"Then what was the reason of the attack on myself?" demanded the artist.

"It wasn't an attack on yourself," declared his interlocutor. "It was a criticism of your work."

She was rather pale, but she regarded him steadily with clear grey eyes.

They were pretty eyes, he noticed, with long black lashes, that looked as if they could be very charming when the owner smiled. She was then very grave.

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"Be that as it may, I must know the writer's name," was Ibbetson's reply to the last remark.

"Well, for once, I'll break our rule," said she, with a flash of scorn in her grey eyes.

"Well?"

"I wrote it."

"You?"

There was a dead silence.

"And may I ask why?" he said slowly, "what had I ever done to you that you should attack me in this cruel—this atrocious fashion? Why do it?"

"It was an honest criticism," said the girl. "I had to say what I thought and felt. Mr. Ibbetson," she went on rapidly while her grey eyes searched his face, "there is a place in the world waiting for you which you can and ought to fill. You're breaking your father's heart by leaving it. Oh, yes, I know more about you than you think. We have mutual friends. Go back to your place and your own people. Take the place you are fitted for and leave painting to those who are fitted for it. Oh," she cried, breaking off suddenly, "how fearfully presumptuous of me to talk to you like this!"

"Go on," said the the artist eagerly.

"Will you do as I ask? Will you go back to your father and your own place in the world?" She looked very sweet as she bent forward with this question on her lips—her eyes, her cheeks all alight with excitement.

"I'll do it," cried Ibbetson impulsively. Five minutes later he was in a Fleet Street telegraph office dispatching a message.

It read as follows:

> Ibbetson, Copleston House, Hagley Road, Birmingham—Fatted calf for one. Arrive by 9.20 to-morrow. Hamo.

Then he went and dined, and the studio was not visited till quite late in the evening. The faithful Freddie was installed in his usual chair.

"Well, is the deed of blood done? There are no marks of combat on your manly face. E'en now your victim welters in his gore, perhaps?" said he.

"Don't talk rot, Freddie," laughed his friend.

"There's a letter for you on the mantelpiece," continued Freddie. "Came by special messenger. Gal's fist, too. What have you been up too, young fellow?"

The handwriting on the missive amiably pointed out by Mr. Mostyn was totally unknown to Ibbetson. He tore it open, and with a chill feeling about the heart read the following words:

> Dear Mr. Ibbetson,
>
> I do not know how to forgive myself and I dare not ask you to forgive me, for the foolish joke I played this afternoon. I did not really write the notice in the *Review of the Day* nor do I know who did it. I am only the Editor's amanuensis. But you looked so angry when you came in, and I wanted to save some poor man from coming into contact with that dreadful looking stick, so that I could not resist saying I wrote the notice, to see what you would do. You were so nice about it that I felt frightfully ashamed of myself afterwards; so I think you are entitled to an explanation and an apology.
>
> Yours faithfully,
> Winifred Hardy.

Ibbetson remained staring at this somewhat incoherent epistle with such a blank face that for the second time that day Mr. Mostyn was constrained to ask what the excitement was.

"Nothing," said Ibbetson with a harsh laugh, "only a very commonplace affair. I have been made a very complete fool of by a wheedling tongue and a pair of grey eyes—that's all."

He flung the letter savagely into the grate.

"You are an old humbug," quoth Mostyn softly, "but you must get up very early in the morning to deceive your old uncle Freddie. I saw you look carefully to see if there was any fire before you behaved so rudely to the young lady's letter."

Mr. Ibbetson did not go to Birmingham after all, the next day. He took to loitering in Fleet Street, and on several occasions was fortunate enough to encounter Miss Hardy. Doubtless his intention was to reprove her severely for the unlady-like trick she played him in the office of the *Review of the Day*. For the better administration of this rebuke they were wont to adjourn to a tea-shop in the vicinity of Ludgate Circus.

"I thought you were going back to Birmingham," remarked the lady-secretary, on one of these occasions.

"I will—if you'll come with me," he said quickly.

Of course it was not to be expected that she would say "Yes" all at once, but later on I have reason to believe she did.

VAUGHAN DRYDEN.

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**AT ALL BOOKSELLERS, BOOKSTALLS & LIBRARIES.**

# Love—The Master-Key.

ALTHOUGH not unfrequently quoted, a great number of people have been mistaken in the meaning of the title of Miss Florence Warden's book, "THE MASTER KEY," which has just been issued in sixpenny form. The purport of the story is to prove the old saying that "love is the *master-key* that opens every lock in the heart of man."

The story centres around a girl who is left a widow with an only son. The boy is the heir to large estates, and as is usual, in the event of his death the property will devolve upon the evil genius of the story. With the efforts he makes to secure possession of the prize that is almost within his grasp the plot is concerned, and the reader follows with close interest the tactics that the fond mother resorts to for the purpose of foiling the evil schemes that one by one are devised. Needless to say virtue is rewarded in the result, the plotter receives his due, and the story closes with the hero in full possession of his rights. The sensations in the story include revelations concerning a baby farmer, one or two attempted murders, and a kidnapping scheme. The romance is cleverly told, and lovers of light literature of the melodramatic type will revel in its pages.

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# SHORT STORIES THAT MAKE YOU LAUGH

We devote every week space in *Short Stories* to pithy, humorous anecdotes similar to those which appear in these columns. A prize of £1 1s. will be sent to the reader who submits the best storyette this week, and a Stereoscope to each of those whose attempts are used. The anecdotes may be either original or selected; in the latter case, the source MUST be stated. Attempts must reach the Storyette Editor, *Short Stories* Office, Henrietta Street, Strand, London, W.C., by Monday, May 6th. Post-cards only, please. The prize of One Guinea has been awarded this week to Mr. C. R. Fletcher, 53 Hagley Road, Edgbaston, whose contribution is denoted by a star thus.*

"I'VE got a smart son at the Klondike goldfields."

"Gettin' rich fast, I s'pose?"

"Oh, yes; he writes that he'll soon have enough to get home with."

---

JINKS: "I don't know how you will feel about it, but the fact is my wife, your daughter, is a dreadful hard woman to live with."

Binks: "I can sympathize with you, sir; I married her mother."

---

*A POOR old Scotsman, who could no longer earn his own living, was obliged to accept the kindly proffered hospitality of some English friends.

On the day of his arrival, they, thinking he would enjoy it, procured some watercress, which was added to the things already on the table. The poor man, accustomed all his life to fare of the plainest description, hesitated to partake of such a decided novelty as cress, and only the fear of hurting the feelings of his friends could induce him to make the effort.

In a short time they noticed that tears were coursing down the old man's cheeks, and inquiry elicited this reply:

"I'm thinking what ma puir mither would say 'gin she could see her son eating grass like a coo."

---

NOT long ago, in a police-court in Melbourne, a Chinaman was summoned for being in a tenement unfit for human habitation.

The case was clearly proved, and he was fined £1. But in no way could John be made to understand that a fine had been inflicted.

He sat there with unmoved stolidity, and all the court could get from him was:

"Me no savey (know), no savey."

Here rose a well-known lawyer.

"With your worship's permission," he said, "I think I can make the Chinaman understand."

He was permitted to try.

Striding up to the Celestial he said:

"John, you are fined two pounds."

"No fear, only one."

HEWITT: "The girl in the print dress is a poem."

Jewett: "She differs from most poems."

Hewitt: "How's that?"

Jewett: "Most poems don't get into print."

---

LAST Christmas a young couple, evidently from the country, entered a studio to have their "likeness took."

The operator proceeded to arrange his sitters, though he noticed a look of growing dissatisfaction on the young man's face. He was, however, turning to his camera when he was recalled by the amusing request:

"Hi! mister! Not so close!" Then, with a confidential jerk, "We're only brother and sister, you know."

---

A CERTAIN famous comedian had long dealt with a tradesman named Berry, who, on one occasion, was a little premature in sending in his account.

The actor called on him, and thus eased his mind:

"I say, here's a pretty *mull*, Berry; you have sent in you *bill*, Berry, before it is *due*, Berry. Your father, the *elder* Berry, would not have been such a *goose*, Berry; but you need not look *black*, Berry, for I don't care a *straw*, Berry; and I shan't pay you till *Christmas*, Berry!"

---

"DEAR me," he whispered, "do you think if I married you your father would ever forgive us?"

"I'm sure he would, dear," she asserted softly.

"And would he give us a house of our own?"

"I know he would, dearest."

"And would he give us enough to live beautifully on?"

"I'm sure of it, Harry."

"And would he take me into the firm?"

"Certainly he would."

"And let me run the business to suit myself?"

"Of course he would, darling."

She snuggled to his bosom, but he put her aside coldly.

"Well, I'm afraid I can never marry you, dearest," he said hoarsely. "Your father is altogether too willing to get you off his hands."

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She: "If I should die you would never get another wife who would look after you as I have done."

He: "No; not if I could help it."

---

Myer: "I wonder what causes concussion of the brain?"

Ryder: "A collision between two trains of thought, I suppose."

---

The old, old subject of the supremacy of each sex was being discussed by a man and a young woman. As a final "clincher" the young man said, "There's one thing, at any rate—you never hear of a man wishing he was a woman."

"Of course not!" she retorted. "It might be his fate to marry a man."

---

"I am sensible of the honour you do me, Mr. Mitchell, in the proposal of marriage you have just made," said the young lady, with a slight curl of the lip, "but circumstances over which I have no control compel me to decline the honour."

"What are those circumstances?" demanded the young man.

"Your circumstances, Mr. Mitchell."

---

Here is an instance of Governmental red tape.

The gentleman who was requested to alter his item of fourpence for porter to "porterage," on a subsequent occasion sent in an account for:

"Cabbage, one shilling."

The authorities politely informed him that they could not acknowledge the account. He must pay for his own vegetarian refreshment. However, they were left speechless when their humble servant explained that "cabbage" referred to cab-hire.

---

On a cold, frosty day a crowd of people, among whom were two or three policemen, were congregating together, watching a farrier roughing a horse, when up came a little urchin about eight or nine years of age, thinking there was something the matter.

He elbowed his way through the crowd, when he met a companion about the same age, and said to him:

"What's the matter here, Bill?"

"Matter?" reiterated the other scornfully. "There's nothing the matter, or else there wouldn't be any coppers about!"

The men in blue joined heartily in the burst of laughter that followed.

---

Just after the Forth Bridge had been opened, Queen Victoria expressed a wish to see it on one of her journeys to Balmoral. Her Majesty's desire was gratified.

The train drew up at Dalmeny, the nearest station on the south side, and Lord Rosebery, whose estate borders the Forth at this point, was in attendance to show and explain everything.

When the Queen resumed her northward journey, Lord Rosebery went back to Dalmeny House.

On his way he met his head gardener and told him the Queen had been graciously pleased to accept the grapes that his lordship had taken to Her Majesty.

"That's a'richt, ma loard," replied the gardener, "but did she no' say anything aboot returnin' the basket?"

"That horrid Maud has been gossiping about me."

"Why, how do you know?"

"She kissed me twice when we met to-day."

---

Teacher (taking the class in English history): "Now, William Johnson, what happened on the fifth of November?"

William (readily): "Please, sir, our Henry got his eye blown out, and dad singed off all his whiskers."

---

"Dear me, that was terrible. Man fell overboard in mid-ocean the other day, and never was seen again?" said Hicks.

"Drowned?" asked Mrs. Hicks hysterically.

"Oh, no! of course not." said Hicks irritably. "Sprained his ankle, probably!"

---

"What are you doing?" said the clerk in the hotel. "Do you wish to stifle yourself and die on our hands?"

"What's the matter with you?"

"You've gone and blown out the gas."

"Nothing of the kind. I'm entitled to the use of this gas, aren't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can't get any satisfaction by lighting it. The only way I can get my money's worth is to sit here and smell it."

---

"Miss Gladys," said old Moneybags, "if my suit is not agreeable to you, say so frankly; but do not, I beg of you, tell me that old, old story that you will always look upon me as a brother."

"Sir," replied the lovely young maiden as her eye lit up with the deathless flame of a pure young heart's devotion, or, as another puts it, with the sincerity of a smile on the lip, but a tear in the eye, "I do not love you well enough for a brother, but I have no objection to take you as a husband."

---

An American correspondent gives the following as an example of the rigid formality with which the officials in some parts of Russia act:

Russian Official: "You can't stay in this country, sir."

Traveller: "Then I'll leave it."

Official: "Have you a permit to leave it?"

Traveller: "No, sir."

Official: "Then you cannot go. I give you twenty-four hours to make up your mind as to what you shall do."

---

**YOUR EDITOR AS A PRIZE.**

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The Editor of SHORT STORIES will offer his heart and hand to one of his lady readers! He will marry her!

***LOOK OUT FOR FULL PARTICULARS, WHICH WILL APPEAR SHORTLY.***

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# THE INVISIBLE EYE.

**By J. L. Hornibrook.**

WHEN I caught sight of my old friend Dick Davenport that morning, he was slouching along with his hands behind his back, his chin on his breast, and his brows puckered into a frown. By all of which tokens I knew there was a bit of grit in the machinery somewhere, if I may so express it, for as a general rule life ran as smoothly and pleasantly with him as anyone could wish.

So deep was his preoccupation, I verily believe he would have passed me without a sign of recognition, if I had not planted myself right in his way and compelled him to p ll up.

His face cleared the instant he became aware of my presence, for he had the rare knack of thrusting his own concerns into the background—no mat er how pressing they might be at the moment—when he encountered a friend, and giving himself up heart and soul to the pleasure which the meeting afforded him.

But on this occasion I had no intention of letting him escape an explanation so easily.

"Now, Dick," I said, when our greetings were over, taking him by the arm in a confidential manner. "Where lies the trouble? Out with it, my friend. Unburden yourself."

"Oh, it's the old story," he sighed, dolefully enough.

"What!" I exclaimed. "Not debts, surely? You haven't been launching out into a career of extravagance, have you? You, of all men."

"Oh, no," he anawered. "It's nothing of that kind."

"What is it, then?"

"Well," he said, with a conscious look, and colouring a little, "I was down in Wales lately, and—and——"

"You lost your heart there, I suppose?"

His silence showed that I had not gone very wide of the mark this time.

"And who is the fair enchantress, if I may be permitted to ask?" I said, seeing that he was likely to remain tongue-tied on this point.

He showed unmistakable symptoms of going into raptures on the spot.

"One of the dearest——" he poured forth.

"Granted—all granted!" I hastened to interpose. "It is understood that she is an angel, of course; but what I want to come at is, the name by which your divinity is known here on earth."

If I had let him run on as he had begun, there is no knowing where he might have stopped; but when I tried to pin him down to hard facts, it was with the greatest difficulty I could extract any information from him. I had to drag it out of him bit by bit, and when it was all laid bare I found it was indeed the old, old story, without even the charm of novelty in its details.

It appears that he had been spending a week or two in Wales, where he had met his fate in the shape of a certain Miss Carrie Vaughan, the youngest of her family, who lived at a place called—called—well, I don't think I will attempt the name. The singular part of it was, that he remembered having heard his mother often speak of the Vaughans, though it was so long ago he had utterly forgotten in what connection. His introduction to the family, however, had been quite a casual one, brought about by a slight mishap which befell him on the Welsh hills.

Having exchanged vows of undying affection with Miss Carrie, he hurried back to town to make known the the state of affairs to his uncle, Sir Denham Faulkner. This uncle—his mother's brother—had been god-father, guardian, and general benefactor to him all rolled into one. A good type of the old school, courteous, affable, whole-hearted, his nephew's welfare was the one thing he looked to most, and there was nothing in reason which he denied him.

Sir Denham, in a general way, was one of the most even tempered of men, by no means easily ruffled. You may imagine my friend's surprise, then, when, at the very mention of the name of Vaughan, he started bolt upright in his chair, and glared at his astonished nephew in a way that brought him to a dead stop. It was some little time before the baronet seemed to take the thing in, and then—well, he let himself go.

He strictly forbade Davenport to hold any further communication with the family, or even to mention the name again in his presence, on pain of his severest displeasure.

Upon that, he dismissed the subject once and for all, assigning no reason whatever for his extraordinary outburst.

"It came upon me like a cold water shock," Davenport went on to explain, "for the thought of encountering any opposition never entered my head. But whatever may be the cause of it, there it is; an insuperable barrier as far as I can see. Of course, after all he has done for me, I could not run counter to his wishes, or repay him by open desertion. And yet——"

He broke off with a sigh, and his gaze wandered past me in a dreamy, visionary kind of way, as if a certain scene in distant Wales was rising before him. I confess that I felt sorry for him, for he was manifestly hard hit, and inclined to take his uncle's strictures very much to heart.

At the present moment love and duty were tugging

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and straining at him, each pulling in opposite directions; about as bad a plight as a man could well be in.

"Look here," I said, after turning the matter over in my mind, "I am going down to Wales myself in a week or so on business of my own. Give me the Vaughan's address and I'll look them up. I will introduce myself, of course, as a friend of yours, and by a little gentle probing I may possibly succeed in getting at the root of this matter. From whatever cause Sir Denham's hostility has sprung, you may depend it is known to some at least on the opposite side."

He scribbled the name of the place on the back of his card—a jumble of all the consonants of the alphabet, it looked like, with a vowel or two thrown in—and went on his way in the same state of gloomy depression.

* * * * *

As it so happened, something cropped up in the next few days which caused me to postpone my departure to Wales for a week or two longer. My object in going there was to conduct a series of experiments in kite-photography, a favourite hobby of mine, and one to which I have devoted years of study.

When I got away at last, Davenport's matter was still fresh in my mind, and I determined to sift it thoroughly. As it was immaterial to me what neighbourhood I selected, I fixed my headquarters at a small town within two or three miles of the Vaughans' place, so as to be close at hand, and took an early opportunity of calling upon the family.

It consisted, I found, of Mrs. Vaughan and her three daughters; the father, David Vaughan, having been dead a number of years. The moment I set foot inside the house, a large and rather gloomy country mansion, with a vista of hills in the distance, I felt somehow as if I breathed the atmosphere of mystery, of secret trouble.

Mrs Vaughan, who received me in a very friendly manner, was evidently of a strangely timid, nervous disposition, with a peculiar sadness of expression, and a certain look in her eyes which told of some great shock in the past. From the very first she gave me the impression that there had been a dark tragedy in her life. And the shadow of that tragedy was over the house still. There was a skeleton in the cupboard somewhere of that I felt convinced.

Of the daughters, Miss Carrie was undoubtedly the most attractive in every way; a tender, winsome little thing, upon whom a harsh word would have much the same effect as a chill breath upon a delicate hot-house flower.

From the moment she heard that I was a friend of Davenport's, I could see that she was on hot irons to get me aside and question me concerning him. As I had no wish to keep her in suspense, I soon contrived to give her the opportunity, and then out came the questions in a stream. What had happened to him? Why did he not write? Was he coming back soon, or—or—was he ill?

I endeavoured to soothe her as best I could, said that his silence was due to circumstances over which he had no control, and that he was much distressed at not being able to write. I expressed my belief that all would come right in good time, and begged her meanwhile to keep up a brave heart. Then, in order to avoid becoming entangled in more explicit explanations, I beat a somewhat hasty retreat, having done very little in the way of probing so far.

The short winter's day was shading away rapidly into night as I left the house, and as I had a good long walk before me I set out at a brisk pace.

I had almost reached the gate leading on to the road when it opened suddenly, and a man entered whose appearance, as well as a certain strangeness of manner, struck me as being remarkably odd.

A tall, spare, rugged figure, with that slight stoop which comes of incessant hill-climbing, the stranger appeared to be a man well on in years, but hard, sinewy, active—all bone and muscle, in fact. He was dressed in a rough suit of home-spun, and carried a long stick—something like an Alpine-stock—in his hand, which he grasped in a most aggressive manner the moment he caught sight of me.

Instead of passing by in the ordinary way, he sheered off on to the grass and swept round in a semicircle, keeping his wild eyes fixed upon me, however, the whole time. And in those eyes, gleaming from under the thick thatch of his knitted brows, there was such a strange, fierce, uncanny sort of look that I experienced a most uncomfortable, awesome kind of thrill, and was not a little thankful to get the gate between us.

Glancing back I saw this singular-looking being march straight up to the house, and then caught the soft glow of light as the door was opened. In he stalked as if he were quite at home there, the door closed upon him, and I was left standing at the gate with a misty conception of having accidentally got a peep at the family skeleton.

As I turned away, my eye rested upon an intelligent-looking young fellow who had halted in the middle of the road, evidently to observe the stranger, and who glanced across at me with a curious sort of half-smile.

"Can you tell me who that was?" I asked, approaching him.

"That!" he said, as if astonished at my ignorance. "Why, Mad Morgan, of course."

"Mad Morgan!" I exclaimed. "And who is he?"

"Morgan Vaughan is his proper name, but they always call him Mad Morgan around here," was his reply. "A little touched in the upper storey, you know," he went on, tapping his forehead. "Spends his days mostly in roaming about the hills, and an odd night or two as well."

"Is he any relation of the Mr. Vaughan who used to own this place?" I asked.

"Brother," he answered, and went on his way.

This information started a train of thoughts which occupied me deeply as I trudged back to my hotel, and I wondered if I had here the key to the mystery which so perplexed poor Davenport.

But though I turned and twisted it in every conceivable manner, I could make nothing of it so far, and had to give the thing up for the time being.

Early next morning I started off with my kite and photographic apparatus, intending to put in a good long day among the hills. I had retained the services of a couple of sturdy rustics to lend a hand with the flying-line, for the kites pulling power was enough to lift a single man off his feet.

For the benefit of the uninitiated, let me just say that it is possible now-a-days to take a complete view—or rather series of views—of the surrounding country by the method I was about to adopt, and that from a considerable altitude. The camera, specially constructed for this purpose, is suspended below the kite, in such a position that it commands the scene beneath. Before the lens a small but powerful telescope is placed so as

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to throw a clearer reflection on to the plate. The exposure is regulated by clockwork, and the apparatus is capable of taking a dozen photographs while suspended in mid-air.

Hitherto my experiments had been confined to fairly level ground, but I was anxious to try my hand in a broken and mountainous district, where the scene would afford greater variety. For this reason I selected a spot on the western side of a hill called Craigowen, and from there we sent the kite up. Caught by a light breath of wind it sailed gracefully across the crest of the hill, until it hung suspended over the western side. I was glad of this, for it meant that I would obtain views of an area which was not visible to me at the time.

I expressed my belief that all would come right in good time.

The whole operation, including the hauling down of the heavy kite, takes a good slice out of the day, especially at a time of year when the sun sets early. Indeed, the afternoon was well advanced when I got the apparatus back to earth again, and started to pack up.

I was busily engaged upon this task when I heard a distant shout behind me. Glancing round, I saw a lad from the hotel tearing towards the spot at top speed, holding out something in his hand which looked like a letter.

Wondering what it could be about, I rose from my knees and started off to meet the messenger. As he rushed up breathlessly, and I took the note from him, I saw that the envelope simply bore my name, scribbled in the utmost haste apparently. Tearing it open, I found inside a sheet of notepaper, which contained this startling message:

> For Heaven's sake, come back at once. Something awful has happened.
>
> Davenport.

Davenport in Wales? I could scarcely credit it. When I parted from him in town, it was on the distinct understanding that he would make no move in the matter until he heard from me. A sudden fear gripped me that he had been foolish enough to break out into open defiance of his uncle, which had led to some alarming and totally unexpected development.

I rushed off at once, leaving word for my attendants to follow at their leisure, and reached the hotel quite out of breath. There I found everything in a state of dire confusion. The scared, almost horrified expression in every face told the same tale—something awful had happened! Nor did I remain long in doubt as to what it was, for I suddenly caught one word which explained it all—"murder!"

The landlord, who was anxiously on the lookout for me, took me aside at once, and from him I learnt particulars of the tragedy. Utterly unprepared as I was for anything of the kind, his account shocked me beyond measure.

Mr. Davenport, he said, had arrived at the hotel soon after I had set out that morning, to be followed in hot haste by his uncle, Sir Denham Faulkner. The latter went straight to his nephew's room, where judging by their raised and heated tones, a stormy scene ensued. For some time their voices were heard as if in high dispute, and then Sir Denham walked straight out of the place, evidently hurt and offended. A minute or so later the nephew ran out after him, caught him up and the dispute appeared to be renewed. They disappeared together along a path leading to the hills.

After the lapse of an hour or two the nephew returned alone, went straight to his room, and locked himself in. And then, later on, they were horrified to learn that the dead body of Sir Denham Faulkner had been found among the hills, his skull crushed in by a piece of rock which had been flung down upon him from the top of a bank upon which he was evidently resting at the time.

"And your blundering country police have gone and arrested the nephew, I suppose?" I broke in.

"They have, sir," he admitted. "Before he was removed to the police-station he scribbled a line to you, which I undertook should be placed in your hands without a moment's delay."

I waited to hear no more. Off I rushed to the police-station, and there I found poor Davenport, utterly overwhelmed and crushed by this terrible calamity.

It was not his own position, bad as it was, which weighed upon him. He scarcely seemed to give a thought to that. It was grief for the untimely fate of his uncle which bowed him down so. Above all, the sting of remorse was at him, and he bitterly bemoaned

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the fact that they had parted in coldness, if not in anger.

In answer to my questions he had little further information to impart. He stated that, consumed with impatience at not hearing from me, he had risked a flying visit to Wales himself. His uncle must have discovered his purpose in some way, however, for he followed by the very next train and caught him up at the hotel.

He frankly admitted that angry words had passed between them, for something Sir Denham had said unfortunately stung him into a hasty retort. But the moment his uncle's back was turned he bitterly repented having given way to this momentary display of temper, and ran after him to beg his forgiveness.

The baronet, however, received him coldly, and remained deaf to all his intreaties.

They parted some distance outside the town, and having wandered about for upwards of an hour in great distress of mind, Davenport made his way back to the hotel.

"And Sir Denham went on alone?" I said.

"He d d."

"Which direction did he take?"

"He kept straight on towards the hills."

"Where was the body found?"

"At the foot of Craigowen."

I fairly bounded to my feet.

"On which side?" I cried, scarcely able to control myself. "Tell me on which side?"

"On the western side, I believe."

"And at what hour do you suppose he would have reached that spot?"

"About noon."

That was enough! I was off like a shot, tearing back to the hotel in breathless haste. At noon my kite was sailing high over Craigowen, an invisible eye was looking down upon the western side of that hill, taking silent note of all that transpired beneath, and recording it in a manner there was no disputing.

My two rustics had just returned when I reached the door of the hotel. I pounced upon the photograph apparatus, took it straight to my room, and locked myself in.

Far into that night I toiled over my negatives, developing one after another, with feverish eagerness. Views! Nothing but barren views! Not a single human form to be seen anywhere!

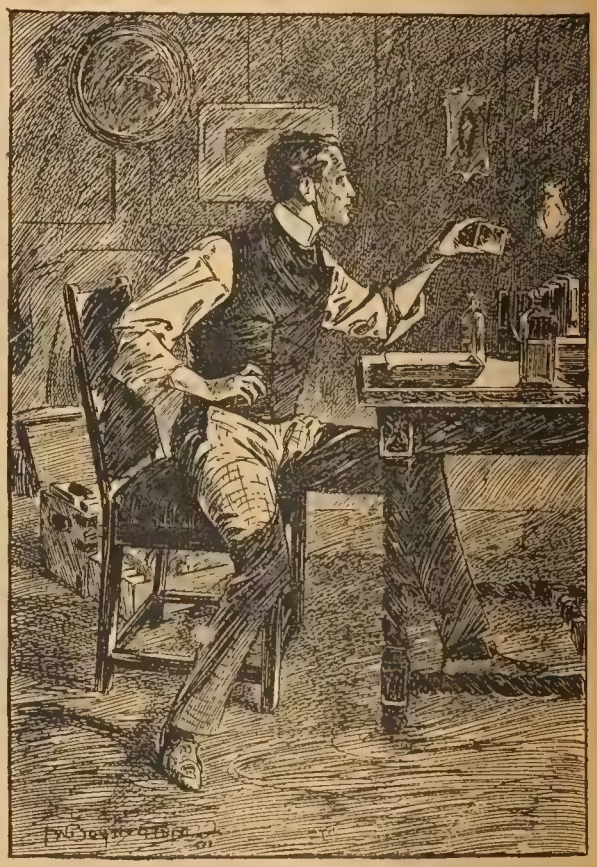
But stay; what was this? What were those two faint shadows which were beginning to loom from the plate now before me. I held my breath; my hand shook. Clearer and clearer those indistinct blotches grew; and then—yes!—I recognised that figure seated on the shelving bank, with his chin on his hand. It was none other than Sir Denham Faulkner.

Behind him, on top of the bank, a piece of rock held high above his head in both hands, as if in the very act of hurling it down upon the unconscious figure beneath, was a man; a wild, uncouth, savage-looking being, about whom there seemed to be something strangely familiar. Good Heavens! I recognised that strange form now! It was Morgan Vaughan—Mad Morgan, as I had heard him called.

* * * * *

Needless to say, I was in a position next day to make Davenport's innocence abundantly clear, even to the intelligence of the country police. They had the grace to admit their blunder on the spot, and set out at once to arrest the real author of the crime, Morgan Vaughan, but only secured him after a prolonged and desperate struggle.

Nor was the murder, as might be supposed, a mere wanton one, the outcome of a sudden access of mania. There was a deep motive for it. It subsequently transpired that there had been a feud between the two men, arising out of an affair in which Morgan's brother, David Vaughan, was also concerned. It seems that a number of years ago, before Sir Denham had succeeded to the title or estates, and when there appeared little likelihood of their ever coming his way, he was on a walking tour



But stay; what was this? What were those two faint shadows which were beginning to loom from the plate before me.

through Wales. Being poor enough in those days he had little more, in the shape of worldly goods, than his knapsack and the clothes he stood in.

By chance—an unlucky chance for him as it proved—he fell in with a younger sister of the two Vaughans, a very beautiful girl, which resulted in a clandestine love affair. They met frequently, but always in secret, for the brothers were inordinately proud, and, besides, designed their sister for a wealthy, middle-aged baronet, a neighbour of theirs.

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In some way it came to their ears that she was in the habit of meeting a stranger, who was touring the country on foot. The discovery rendered them furious. They laid in wait for the lovers, surprised them at one of their stolen meetings, and attacked young Faulkner in such a brutal manner that they left him for dead on the ground. The sister they dragged home, where they shut her up in one of the top rooms of the house.

Their cruel treatment, added to the shock of having seen her lover murdered, as she thought, before her very eyes, preyed upon her mind to such an extent that she lost her reason. Death released her from her sufferings soon afterwards; but with her last breath, with all the strength that remained to her, she called down vengeance upon both the brothers.

Nor was the vengeance long delayed. Within twelve months David Vaughan met with a shocking death upon the mountains, leaving a widow and three young children to mourn his loss. Morgan lived, but the double tragedy wrought so upon his mind that he became little better than a maniac. He died in a Criminal Lunatic Asylum.

It was generally supposed that he had caught sight of Sir Denham on that fatal day, recognised his old enemy, and followed him until an opportunity presented itself of taking him unawares.

For the rest, when Davenport was united to the youngest of the three sisters, the feud was closed for ever. And though their future happiness was not exactly clouded by the knowledge of the foregoing facts, yet I fancy it was of a more subdued nature than might have been the case otherwise.

---

She: "What do you want me to hold the tacks for Claude?"

He: "So that I won't be laid up with a smashed thumb."

---

She: "I wonder what makes Funniman hesitate so in his speech this evening?"

He: "Well, you see, the jokes he has to utter are such old friends that he doesn't like to part with them."

---

George: "I see nothing for us but to elope. Do you think your father would forgive us?"

Ethel: "I am sure he would."

George: "How can you be so sure?"

Ethel: "I felt a little nervous on that score, and—and I asked him."

---

Every man should always write as plainly as he can.

Once upon a time a young man wrote to a girl: "Your loveliness has inspired me to ask you to become my wife," and she read it "loneliness," and got so indignant that she refused him by return of post.

---

"Ever quarrel with your wife?"

"No."

"Have any trouble with servants?"

"No."

"Children worry you?"

"No."

"Great Cæsar, man, how's that?"

"Ain't married, and live by myself."


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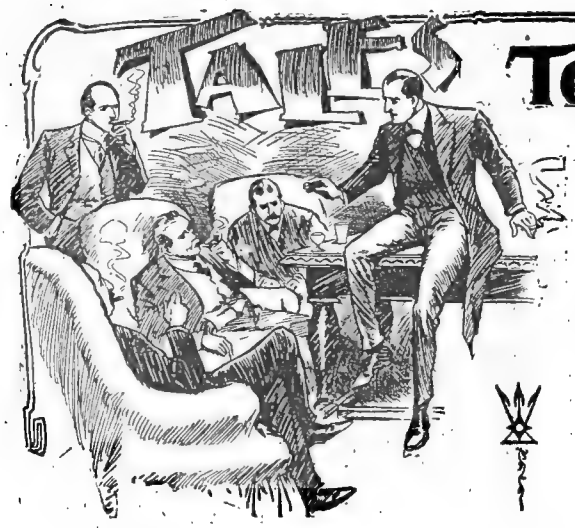


# TOLD "OFF DUTY."

[YOU probably don't know the "Stand-Easy" Club. It isn't in the directory, and you might live next door to the place for years without knowing of its existence by that name. It isn't a conventional club; there is no subscription, and there is no register of members. It is merely a room in a quiet, orderly, and select hostelry in Westminster, where, by common consent, a number of officials of all kinds meet when "off duty." There you may find detectives from Scotland Yard, near by; firemen, commissionaires, a soldier or two, and maybe a doctor from St. Thomas' Hospital or elsewhere. A motley crowd they would be if they wore their uniforms, but at the "Stand-Easy" uniforms are a rarity, "mufti" being the unwritten rule. The result is a gathering of quiet, well-behaved, and well-dressed men. Saturday night is the time when one sees the biggest muster, for then it is the custom for one member to regale the company with a story, the story being, as a rule, an account of some incident in the teller's own career.]

## Gregory Wagstaff: South African Millionaire.

### Told by the EX-WARDER.

"No doubt most of you present," said the tall and somewhat stout man with mutton-chop whiskers, who sat in the corner, "know that before I became butler to Sir Ethelbert Tracy, I was a warder at Portland for many years. Now, the story I am going to tell is, strangely enough, not connected so much with my career as warder as with my service at Sir Ethelbert's. Yet, but for my having been employed in the former capacity, the story might well have had a different ending from what it did.

"Sir Ethelbert Tracy, I may tell you, although a landed proprietor, was by no means a wealthy man as wealth is reckoned nowadays. He had a big estate and position to keep up, while all the time his rent-roll showed a considerable annual decrease. Now, Sir Ethelbert had a daughter, a beautiful girl of about twenty. Madge was her name, and a better-liked young mistress among servants it would have been difficult to find. All of us, from myself and her own maid down to the page-boy and scullery-maid, would have done her any service, for we worshipped the very ground she walked on. And talking of this kind of dog-worship reminds me that, at the time of which I speak, Miss Madge was simply adored by a young London gentleman, a certain Gerald Waine, who was a-studying at the Bar. Miss Madge, in her turn, loved him as much as he loved her, though, of course, as is the way with young ladies, she didn't show it same as he did.

"Unfortunately, young Mr. Waine was poor. This studying at the Bar didn't seem at that time a very paying sort of game, and Sir Ethelbert, when his consent to their engagement was asked, wouldn't hear of it. It seems that he had other intentions regarding the marriage of his daughter; and the fact was he wanted her to marry money and a lot of it.

"So the two young folks had to leave off seeing one another; but, as the old saying is, absence makes the heart grow fonder, and Miss Madge and Mr Gerald didn't stop loving each other just because they happened to be separated.

"Soon after this, Sir Ethelbert went to London—to his house in Belgravia, leaving me in charge of his country residence. In London he made the acquaintance of a certain Mr. Gregory Wagstaff, a man of about forty, and worth well-nigh as many millions of money. At least, such was the rumour that reached us. And it seemed true enough, too, for the papers were full of news about him just then, and stated how Gregory Wagstaff, having emigrated to South Africa some years before as a penniless young man, had stumbled over a nugget or a gold mine, and had now returned to his native land a millionaire.

"Well, the next thing we hears about Mr. Wagstaff was, that he and Miss Madge had become engaged. I, for one, couldn't understand it, for the young lady had doted on Gerald Waine but a little time before. However, the fact remained, she was engaged, and the engagement was announced in all the fashionable papers.

"For the next few weeks, I learnt nothing further; but at length Sir Ethelbert arranged to give a grand dinner-party at his London house, in honour of the engaged couple. As it was to be a very swell affair, all available aid was pressed into service, and, among others I was sent for.

"The night of the party arrived, and the guests began thronging to Sir Ethelbert's house. Dinner began. Mr. Gregory Wagstaff, I was given to understand, was the gentleman sitting alongside my master. He was tall, rather stout, of ruddy complexion, and had a pair of whiskers that looked something like Dundreary's, cut off suddenly at a level with the jawbone.

"But what struck me as most curious was, that I seemed somehow to remember his face. As I handed him some wine, he happened to raise his eyes, and it was then that a sudden thought flashed through my brain that I had seen those eyes before. But where, I couldn't for the life of me recall. Nor could I, although I kept on the look-out for another straight glance at my gentleman. And so the dinner passed off without anything happening.

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"It was a day or two after this that I had a long walk with Emma, Miss Madge's own maid. I was rather sweet on Emma at the time, and was trying to pluck up courage to ask her to take me for better or for worse.

"And as we walked that afternoon under the trees in Kensington Gardens, I suddenly blurted the question out.

"What did Emma reply? Neither 'yes' nor 'no.' She liked me well enough, she said, and she was willing to marry me provided I would do her a favour.

"'What is it, my dear?' I asked, 'I'm willing to do any mortal thing a man can do.'

"At that, Emma replied that she was much concerned about her young mistress. Miss Madge had confessed to her that she was very unhappy; that, while she loved Gerald Waine with all her heart, her father had made her engage herself to the African millionaire. She hated this man Wagstaff, and distrusted him in the bargain.

"'Well, what can I do, Emma dear?' I asked, when my sweetheart had told me all this.

"'Can't you stop the wedding in some way?'

"'Stop the wedding! Me—Sir Ethelbert's butler—stop the wedding which he himself has arranged! Good gracious me!'

"'Well, if you don't, William,' Emma replies, 'all is over between us.'

"'But be reasonable, my dear,' I says. 'Ask me to do anything in reason, and see how ready I'll be to do it.'

"'I want you to do nothing else but this. If Miss Madge marries this man, she will be wretched for life. She told me herself she distrusts him, and that she'd just as soon marry a convict.'

"I stopped dead-still at the word. My heart almost came into my throat, and I felt my brain a-throbbing. Then something seemed to go pop inside, and I jumped a yard in the air.

"'Emma!' I shouts in my excitement, 'Emma, I'll do it—I'll stop this wedding!'

"'You will, William,' answers Emma. 'I thought you would. You're the dearest duck of an old darling as ever was.'

"And with that she gives me such a kiss as I shall live in memory of to my dying day.

"Now, perhaps you're all a-wondering what it was that made me suddenly change round, and speak so confidently about stopping the wedding.

"Well, the truth is, that when that something went pop in my noddle, I remembered where I'd previously seen the face of Mr. Gregory Wagstaff.

"That don't seem a very important discovery, do it? But it was, as you shall presently hear.

"My first business, when I was free the next day was to seek out Mr. Gerald Waine. He lives somewhere in the Temple, and, after a little trouble, I found him. I told him who I was, and spoke of Miss Madge's reluctance to marry the millionaire, and my promise to Emma to stop the marriage coming off.

"'But how is that to be done, Watkins?' gloomily asked the young chap. 'Heaven knows I'd give anything to stop the affair, but it seems to me there's no possible way of doing this.'

"'I don't know so much about that, sir,' said I. 'Supposing we could prove that this Mr. Wagstaff's past life hadn't been everything it should be, what then?'

"'His past life, Watkins! What do you mean?'

"'I'll tell you, sir,' I replied. 'The case is this. Directly I set eyes on Mr. Gregory Wagstaff, I felt sure I'd met him before, but couldn't recollect when or where. Since then, however, I've remembered. I met him first, sir, in Portland Prison!'

"'Portland Prison?'

"'Yes, sir, I was a warder, and he was a convict!'

"'Are you sure?' he asked in astonishment.

"'Positive! Gregory Wagstaff ain't his name, sir. His real name's Daniel Rook, alias Shooter, alias The Scorpion. He was one of the smartest coiners of the day, and did five years' penal for it in my time.'

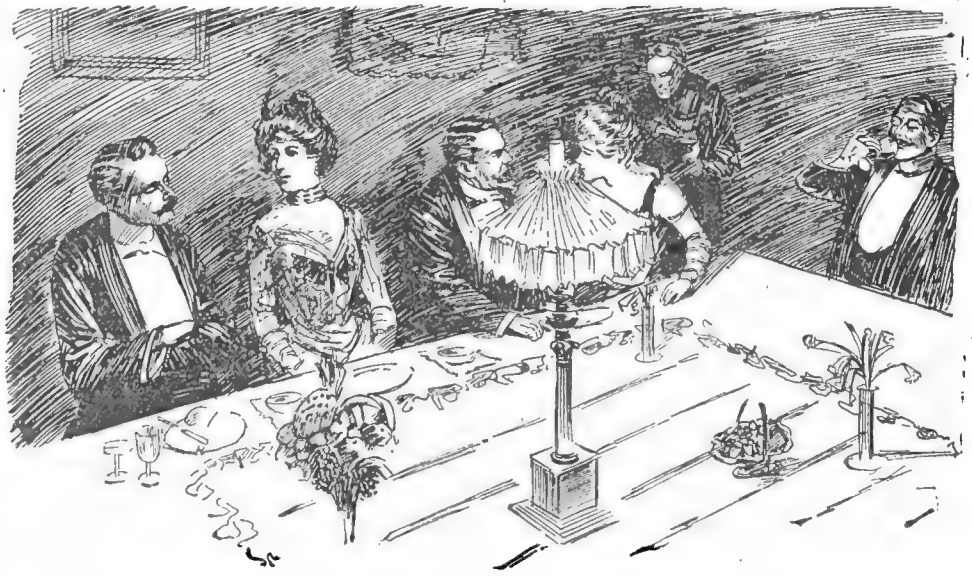
"'Whew!' whistled the young barrister, 'this is a revelation, Watkins. Mr. Gregory Wagstaff must certainly be looked after. I'll get a detective to look up his past history fully.'

* * * * *

"Gerald Waine did put a detective on the scent, and a smart one too. In the course of a week or so, he found out all sorts of things.

"It appeared that not only had Gregory Wagstaff been a coiner, but, under the guise of a millionaire, he was still running a coining establishment on a huge scale on the banks of the Thames down Sunbury way.

"To cut a long story short, the bogus millionaire was arrested three days before that fixed for the wedding. Within a year Gerald Waine married Miss Madge, and, not long afterwards, your humble servant had the pleasure of leading Emma Perkins to the altar."



A sudden thought flashed through my brain that I had seen those eyes before.

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# The Recovered Estate.

Lescombe Hall, the property of Lescombe Lescombe Esquire, was a property of its kind exceedingly pleasant and attractive.

It was situated on a promontory, in one of our south-western counties, which stretched somewhat broadly into the sea, terminating in a point, on which were situated the picturesque ruins of an ancient chapel, which, in the days of faith, pious fishermen had erected to their patron saint.

The house itself was sheltered from the sea breeze by low-lying hills; it was well-nigh covered with ivy; an ancient colony of rooks had built for generations in the tall trees; a pretty cottage, instead of the modern kind of edifice, served as a lodge to the park-like grounds; and all the land within the promontory, strictly so called, formed the Home Farm.

Other land there was outlying the Home Farm, where labourer's cottages, the best in the whole county, lay, nestled each in its own holding—a veritable model village, although it did not arrogate to itself that title, as the manner of some pharisaical villages is.

Beyond this the Lescombe estates did not go, although a few generations back they extended over twelve thousand acres, which were now broken up into farms and holdings and lesser estates.

But the owner of the Hall was the lord of the manor; and whether by courtesy or right, he had the shooting over the whole of the original estate. But the present story is not concerned, as so many stories are, with ancestral acres and ancestral hall. It is rather concerned with Egyptian bonds and Turkish securities.

The father of our present Mr. Lescombe was a man who had done a great deal of prosperous business in the money-marts. Just as he had made a competent fortune he found that the hall, manor, village, and advowson of Lescombe, with divers rights of fishing and shooting, were in the market. It was a curious coincidence that the name of this property should be the same as his own name. It took the old man's fancy hugely that he should be Lescombe of Lescombe.

The former people who had it were of another name, probably derived from another property. But to any man of the name of Lescombe who should buy Lescombe there would be an ancestral hall, not to mention ancestors, all ready provided. So when the great estate was parcelled out and broken up, the Hall and the Home Farm and some out-lying lands were sold to Mr. Lescombe, who was formerly of the Stock Exchange, but who now became Lescombe of Lescombe.

He had a son born to him in this country abode, and, still further to strengthen the idea of territoriality, he had him christened by the name of Lescombe alone. You could hardly have anything stiffer and stronger in the territorial line than Lescombe Lescombe of Lescombe.

But the transformation of the stockbroker into the squire did not altogether work well. The old gentleman pined after business amid his lawns and groves. He could not spend the whole of his time in admiring his own grandeur. He went out shooting; but the recoil of the gun pretty well threw him over. He went out fishing; but as, on the first occasion, very rough weather nearly sent him to the fishes, he settled that "this quest was not for him."

There were only a few neighbours, who did not care for a new man. The Lord-Lieutenant declined to put him in the Commission of the Peace. But what troubled him most of all was that the territorial idea did not seem at all likely to be carried out in its integrity. He had only one living son, a few daughters who did not count for anything, and this son marrying had one daughter.

It seemed likely, therefore, that the first Lescombe of Lescombe would be the last. It was hard lines, and the old man took it to heart. He would probably have lived much longer if he had not settled at Lescombe, but had continued his Stock Exchange business with a country house at Wimbledon.

It takes three generations to make a gentleman, arguing on the unfavourable hypothesis that the original Lescombe of Lescombe hardly came under that denomination. But in the third generation the Lescombe line burst into radiant flower.

Gertrude Lescombe was a lily among lilies, a lady among ladies. An only child, motherless, living in a remote part of the country, her father's companion and help in everything, she had an unusual strength and decision of character.

Her father, born and bred in the country, had taken heavily to the pursuits which his own father had not cared for. The neighbouring squires called on him and liked him. The Lord-Lieutenant of the county invited him to be a magistrate.

The Bishop of the Diocese, holding a confirmation at Lescombe church, stayed at Lescombe Hall, and hoped that if Mr. Lescombe came to town he would look him up at the Athenæum Club.

People commonly said that Gertrude Lescombe would be a great heiress and a capital wife. A capital wife she would certainly be to any man happy enough

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to get her, but as things were going on it was by no means so clear that she would really be an heiress.

Lescombe Hall was kept up, not by the Lescombe lands, which we have seen were limited, but by a very large sum in ready money which the stockbroker had bequeathed to his son. A hundred thousand pounds is a very nice sum; but it takes a great deal of caution and trouble to place it in safe investments.

It had always been a deeply implanted maxim in Lescombe Lescombe's mind that he should never put all his eggs in one basket.

This may be very true as a general adage. But egg after egg may be broken, or basket after basket may be lost.

This was unfortunately the case in the present instance. He thought he had distributed his coin in so many good securities that he had made himself quite safe.

But when Dame Fortune begins to depress her wheel, nothing can stop that unfavourable process. Egg after egg went smash. He went into a coal-mine; the price of coal fell. He took shares in a bank; the bank broke, and the shares were put into heavy contributions. He went into a railway, and no dividend was declared. He sold out Egyptians at a heavy loss. The Turkish bonds confiscated half his remaining income.

A hundred thousand pounds is a great deal; but it will soon look foolish under such an accumulation of disasters. As a matter of fact, it evaporated entirely. It is unnecesary to go through the different stages of a sad experience which has become only too common a one in recent history. It became necessary that the estate itself should be sold to satisfy outstanding demands, and to provide a modest subsistence for a retreat at Cheltenham or Bath.

* * * * *

Two young men were sitting in the smoking-room of a London club. They had dined together, and sipped curaçoa, had had a game of billiards, and now, according to the fashion of these days, were going in for aerated waters and spirits. They were smoking meditative cigars, and were adopting that earnest business talk which men take up when their faculties are freshened up a few hours after dinner. They were evidently the kind of men who would sit up to any hour of the night, and get up at any hour of the night, and get up at any hour of the morning.

"I wish everybody had your luck," said the junior. "A legacy of ever so much money with no other condition than that you should lay it out in land. A cool hundred thousand!"

It was not very clear how even such a sum could be regarded as a matter of temperature. Major Eveleigh simply re-echoed the phrase.

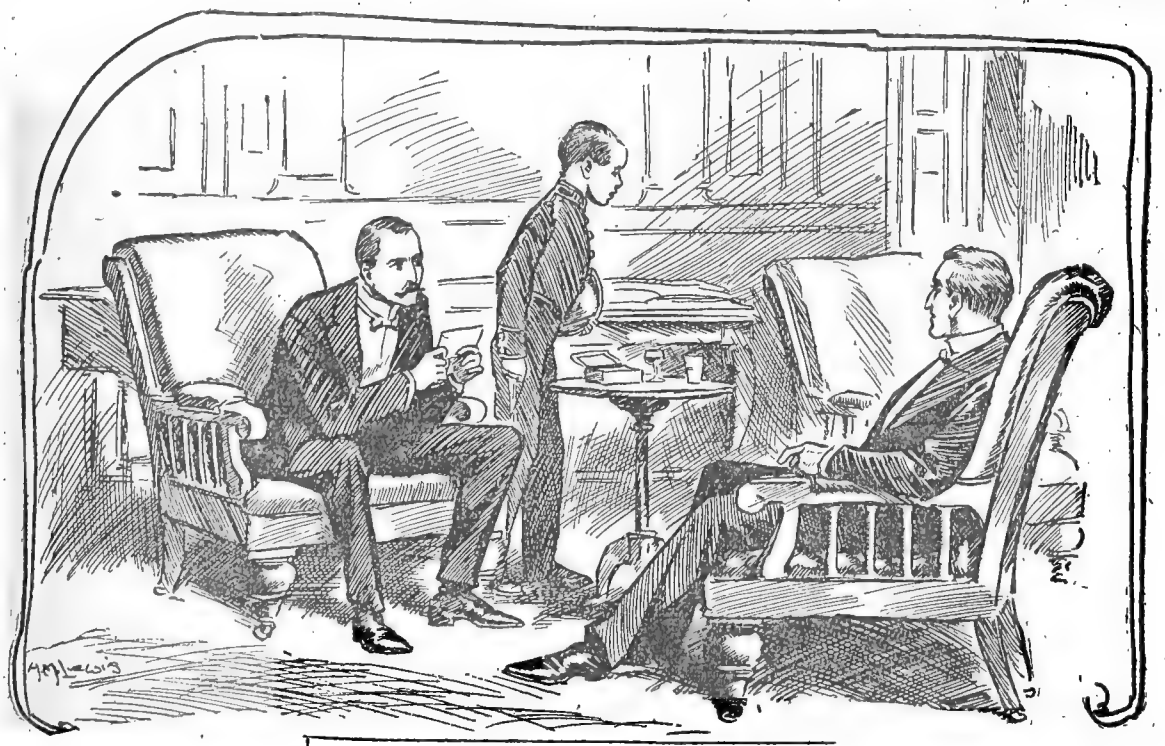
"A cool hundred thousand."

"And how are you getting on about investing in land?"

"Parker—he's my man of business—and I are doing what we can, inserting advertisements and looking out for what advertisements come in the way. We have been having a splash in the *Times*, the *Field*, and so on."

"And what have you heard?"

"Oh, several things. There's a very good place not so far from Sandringham, lots of game and fishing.



"By Jove, it's the Lescombe postmark!"

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Then there's another in Cheshire, with a lot of very good houses about. Then there's a glorious place in North Wales, with a couple of lynns and a salmon river all to yourself, as good as being in Norway. Then there's another place which I have heard of which would probably suit me best of all, only I'm afraid that there is hardly enough land, Lescombe, down in the west counties."

"Never heard of it."

"It's an uncommonly pretty place, though the world knows nothing of its prettiness. I know it very well,

"Papa, dear," she said. "What is the matter?"

although I have never been there. I think I must run down and see it. The fact is that it once belonged to my own ancestors, and my mother often used to tell me how she spent her childish days there. It was all sold off, as the proceeds had to be divided among a lot of us. The present owner has the same name as the estate, but he wants to sell it, and will take a fair price. I must get Parker to see if there is any more land to be had in the neighbourhood. I have written to Mr. Lescombe to say that I shall probably run down and look at the place, more especially as I had an old association with it."

Just at this moment a page entered the smoking-room and handed Major Eveleigh a letter on a salver.

"By Jove, it's the Lescombe postmark! Excuse me if I read it. Light up again, old man."

The Major read the letter and appeared much gratified by the contents.

"This is really very kind and gentlemanly. Read it, Hardy."

"Lescombe Hall, June 18th."

"Anniversary of the battle of Waterloo," murmured Mr. Hardy.

"Quite right, Hardy. Whatever else we forget, we will never forget the anniversary of the battle of Waterloo."

Mr. Hardy went on with the letter.

DEAR SIR,

If you have any idea of coming into our part of the country, we shall be extremely pleased if you will come and stay here as long as may suit your convenience. If you think of purchasing the place, this will give you the opportunity of acquainting yourself minutely with all the details of the property. What you say about the Hall having originally belonged to your family is full of interest to me. Their tradition still lingers in the country-side, and is uniformly favourable to them. I shall be extremely pleased to have the opportunity of showing hospitality to one who no doubt is a worthy descendant of the old owners, and may be the owner himself. You probably know that we are rather sequestered and the neighbourhood is thin, but we will do our best to make your stay pleasant. Yours faitufhlly,

LESCOMBE LESCOMBE.

* * * *

It was quite a new sensation to Major Eveleigh to find himself in the pleasant guest-chamber of the old mansion at Lescombe. From this chamber he caught a distant view of the sea, and in another direction he looked beyond the carriage-drive and the meadows to the little village and its gray tower, "standing four-square to every wind that blows."

Major Eveleigh afterwards declared that quite a remarkable mental-mood came upon him as he awoke that first morning in the guest-chamber.

"I assure you, Hardy," he once said, months and months afterwards, to his old friend, "I felt a most singular sensation. The room and every object in the room seemed strangely familiar to me. I seemed to be in a place which was perfectly familiar to me. Was it a transmitted feeling from my ancestors that I was sharing in what had been their experiences, or was it a prophetic feeling about times to come?"

He had wondered very much who the "we" could be; he had accidentally heard that there was no Mrs. Lescombe.

Did Lescombe have an editorial habit of describing his own individuality as "we," or had he any people of his own who would help to make his visit a pleasant one?

He discussed the matter as he went down by the express, and came to the sage conclusion that time would show.

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He came in late, for the train had been delayed, and after some sherry-and-water, had gone to bed.

We have made him express his feelings when he first awoke next morning. He tubbed, and felt prepared for breakfast and business.

When he came down, the "we" was most satisfactorily explained. Miss Lescombe was presiding, fresh and fair as morning itself, perhaps with a little constraint about her, but with a natural graciousness which would not, for a moment, allow him to suppose himself an unwelcome guest. Great headway was made with the breakfast, but none with the business. The curious thing was, this business was soon relegated into the background, and then seemed to vanish.

Squire Lescombe showed his guest over the house and out-buildings, conservatories and gardens; showed his horses, dogs, and stock; but it was entirely in the way that country gentlemen treat their visitors. Then he took him into the old church, where the Major worked up the arrivals, junctions, and departures of his ancestors.

It was very strange that the old clerk was liberally rewarded for his good memory. Then they went to the little bay, and henceforth the Major substituted a plunge in the sea for his morning tub.

Mr. Lescombe was a most generous type of host. Nothing was left undone that could add to the happiness of his visitor, and that without the slightest thought of selfishness. But, somehow, Gertrude Lescombe formed the chief element in that exceeding happiness.

She steered when he put the boat to sea; she rode out with him, or took him out in her governess-car to see the chief points of interest in the neighbourhood. She took him out to St. Julian's Point, that he might sketch the old ruins, and the white cliffs, and the great white sea beyond, and the contorted rocks which rose out of the depths not far from shore.

As for business, he left it to his man of business, Mr. Parker, and to the gentleman, whoever he might be, who was the Mr. Parker on the other side of the question.

Oh, why couldn't things go on in the pleasant way in which they were going on? Why should the ugly business element be always obtruding itself in the midst of pleasant things?

One day they were sitting over their wine—sitting down over port and claret, which the old stock-jobber had had down half-a-century before.

The Major was holding the glass to the light, and enjoying the ruby tint.

"Do you think you will like the place, Major?"

"I do indeed, more especially as I find there will be a good deal of land in the market soon, and Mr. Parker sends me word that he secured the refusal of it."

"My man Mr. Mordaunt, will give your man, Mr. Parker, all the deeds and particulars."

"I have told Mr. Parker that I shall be perfectly content with any proposals that Mr. Mordaunt makes."

It will be seen that our Major was not a hard man of business to deal with.

"I assure you, my dear fellow, I shall give up the place to you with greater pleasure than to any other living man. You are the right man in the right place. Your people were here, and it seems only right that you should come back to it again."

And it certainly was a case of more poetical justice than one often finds in the world. Old Lescombe bought the estate with his City money, and here comes a descendant of the old stock who buys it back.

Mr. Lescombe wanted to sell his estate. Land sells well, and hardly produces two per cent. to the buyer.

To her came the gallant Major, portfolio in hand.

He wanted the money, which would be some forty thousand pounds, which would pay off all his liabilities, and leave him the money that would suffice for watering-place existence.

But it did seem hard lines to him that he must give up the old place. He had taken to the country as thoroughly as his father before him had been unable to to do so. He now remembered that among the conditions of sale there was a sentence respecting "immediate possession." The immediate possession was all very well on the side of receiving immediate payment, but it was not so well on the side of immediately turning out.

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But it must be done, thought the Squire remorsefully. It was now becoming high time that he should look out for a new residence in Brighton or Scarborough. He must put things in order, gather up his scattered sheaves. He must begin at once, and first of all with his own private chattels and belongings.

It was a piteous sight to see the old man in his den, bringing together fishing-rods and lines, books and papers, disturbing things which all his life long had never been disturbed. He found, when the time now came that he should be transplanted, how deeply his whole being had taken root in the soil. He was soon tired and bewildered, leaning his face on his hands and moaning.

Just then Gertrude entered the room.

"Papa dear," she said, feeling uneasy, and moving quickly towards him, "what is the matter? Tell me."

"There is nothing the matter, dear; only I am rather put out this morning. It makes me sorry to leave the old place."

"Sorry! I should think so, indeed. I begin to hate that Major Eveleigh. The notion of his turning us out of doors!"

Ah, Gertrude, Gertrude, is this statement strictly veracious and historic? After all those walks and rambles, is there only a feeling of hatred implanted in your celestial breast?

"It is no fault of his, my dear," said the old man. "He only comes because I want to go. And he comes in a much more pleasant and liberal way than many would come."

"But it is so hard that we should have to go, owing to those shocking banks and railways."

"You will enjoy the change to Bath or Cheltenham, my dear. Plenty of society, promenades, balls, concerts."

"Some girls might enjoy it, papa, but not I; at least not for more than a week or two. I think Lescombe the most beautiful spot in the whole world; the sea, the combes, the moor, the mountains, the woods."

"I know it, my dear. I know it as well as you do. But, Gertrude, you are not a child. You know all my affairs as well as I know them myself. Let us be grateful that this sale will enable us to leave the place with honour, and live pleasantly in a pleasant place."

On several occasions he afterwards descanted on the glories of Brighton and Scarborough. But though Gertrude tried to appear delighted with his description, she retained her private conviction that Lescombe was the centre of the universe.

* * * * *

One day she had been sitting on a mossy stone beneath an ancient arch of the ruins of St. Julian's Chapel.

"To her," as they say in the playbook came the gallant Major, portfolio in hand, to complete some sketches of the ruins and of the scenery about them. However hateful he might be as the earlier proprietor of Lescombe, still the monster drew so well that he was quite capable of giving Gertrude Lescombe a few useful hints. They both worked together for half-an-hour.

"Well this is a beautiful place," said the Major, really with a keen love of fine scenery.

But the words grated unpleasantly on Gertrude's ear, as if they conveyed a thorough appreciation of newly-acquired property.

"Dear old Lescombe!" said the girl, and the fair lips began to quiver and the eyelashes were wet.

The Major did not observe these signs of emotion, and proceeded:

"I shall not make any alteration. The place is simply perfect. I shall leave everything exactly as it is. I really cannot make out why the Squire should want to give up the place. He cannot be so well off anywhere else."

Looking at his companion's face the Major saw that she was moved with deep emotion. She turned her face away and raised her hand to screen herself from observation.

"Miss Lescombe—Gertrude," he exclaimed, "what on earth is the matter? It is impossible that I can have said anything to give you pain. I would rather cut off my right hand than do so."

"It is not your fault, I know very well, Major Eveleigh; but we are so very, very, sorry to leave the old place. Why do we leave it? You don't suppose we should leave it unless we were obliged to leave."

"Obliged!" echoed the Major, with a genuine look of amazement. "I had really never thought of the matter from that point of view."

Neither had he. His own impressions had been, as he afterwards had an opportunity for explaining, that the squire, having no son, did not care to keep such a big place in hand, and thought of retiring to some fashionable locality.

Unfortunately in these days it is no new thing for people to give up country estates and retire into fashionable centres.

"Now Gertrude, dear Gertrude listen to me," said the Major, placing his hand on her arm in a beseeching mood. "You may be sure that I do not want you to leave Lescombe. Ever since I have known you I have the ambition to make you in real truth the mistress of Lescombe, and the place would lose all its charms if you would not stay here as my wife."

And now Gertrude was trembling as well as crying.

"And as for the dear old man, I shall be delighted if he will stay here altogether, exactly as he used to do. We will be as happy as we have been during the last few weeks."

And the happy girl was obliged to confess that if she loved Lescombe and her father, she also truly loved Frank Eveleigh.

I do not exactly know what were the settlements and the business arrangements. They were in the safe hands of Mr Parker and the gentleman on the other side.

As the Major lucidly explained the matter, any money he put into the estate would eventually come back to him. It was only taking money out of one waistcoat pocket and putting into the other. Hardy was the "best man" on the occasion of the marriage. Gertrude finds that, much as she loves Lescombe a run on the Continent and a season in town are endurable.

The Squire continues the virtual lord of Lescombe. The Eveleighs have two sons; and one of them, christened Lescombe, is to assume the name and arms of his grandfather; so that there is every probability that there will yet be another Lescombe Lescombe of Lescombe.

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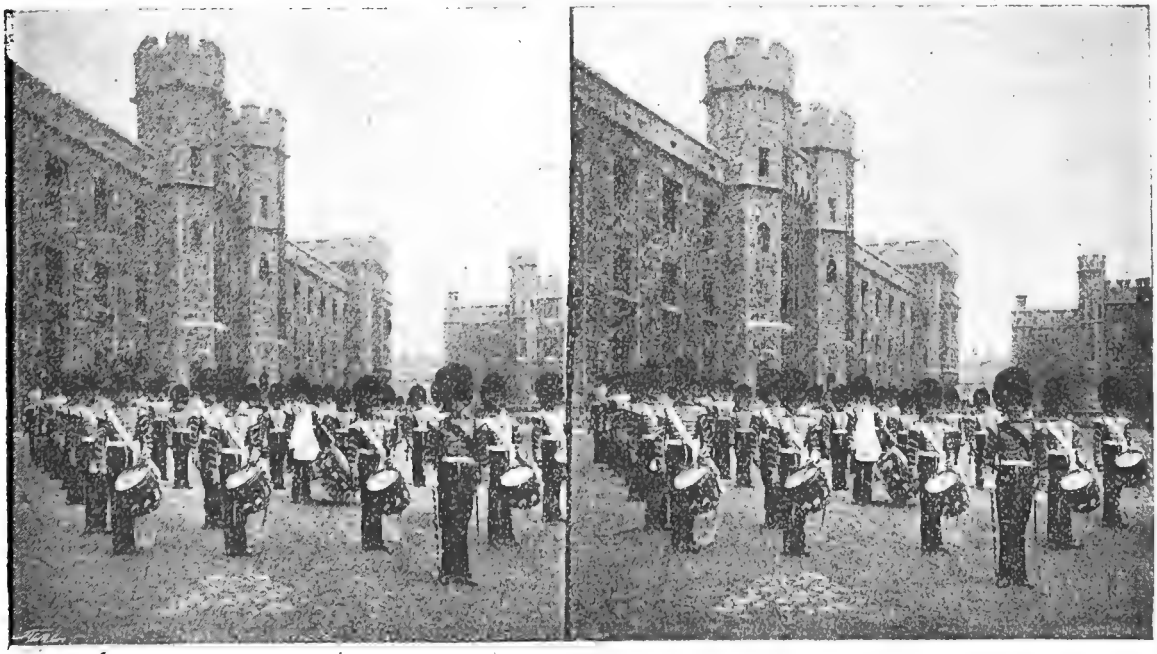
# Our Stereoscopic Gallery.

**In Kew Gardens.**



**The Grenadier Guards' Drums and Fifes.**

Readers will be pleased to hear that we are now giving away Stereoscopes in connection with our WEEKLY POSTCARD COMPETITION.—See page 553.

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*New Serial.—Start To-day.*

By HEADON HILL.

*Author of "The Peril of the Prince," "Seaward for the Foe," "Guilty Gold," etc.*

SUMMARY.

THE steamship *Trojan* is homeward bound from the Cape. On board is Michael Standridge, who is returning to England from the Kimberley diamond fields, in possession of the "Kimberley Elephant," the largest diamond found in the colony. On the ship is his half-brother, Simon Hoathley. On the way up the English Channel the latter steals into the miner's cabin with the intention of murdering him and obtaining possession of the diamond. The miner, however, is on the alert, and presents a pistol at the intruder's head.

Michael sells his diamond for £20,000 to Messrs. Strauss and Lightfoot, whose clerk, Swinley Tasker, he discovers in an attempt to rob him of £35. Michael reads Tasker a lecture, kicks him, and departs—having made an enemy of this rascal. Reading is where Michael expects to find news of his daughter, and he purchases Kennett's Cross, a dilapidated farmhouse in the neighbourhood, this house meeting his requirements by being very secluded, and on a clay soil suitable for brickmaking.

He spends his time in making bricks, and as each batch is made he draws out from the bank a thousand pounds in gold, until at length his balance is quite low. One day Michael is thrown out of his pony-trap, and enters a house for assistance. Here he finds Cuthbert Blakesley, the cashier at the bank, and two ladies, and recognises in the younger one, to whom Cuthbert is engaged to be married, a strong resemblance to his wife.

Mrs. Bonfield is able to prove that Marion is Michael's daughter, and he promises to acquaint her shortly with the secret of Kennett's Cross. A few weeks later Marion and Cuthbert are sitting in the garden, waiting for her father, when a constable enters and arrests Cuthbert on the charge of murdering Michael.

CHAPTER V. (*continued*).

HOATHLEY AND TASKER MEET TO DISCUSS THINGS.

"WELL, you are a fair scorcher, Hoathley," exclaimed the clerk under his breath. "I have been expecting you this hour or more, but I had pretty well given you up after reading that"

"I don't know why you should," said he of the swivel eye. "When first I had the good fortune to make your acquaintance over the sale of my few diamonds—when, in fact, you were able by a lucky fluke to put me on the track I had lost—I told you brother Michael was not likely to pan out as a profitable investment for a life assurance office. But this is a regular thoroughfare. You know the ropes here better than I do; where can we have a quiet chat far from the madding crowd?"

Tasker rose, and leading his companion into the Hall piloted him across it in the rear of the spectators to the prompt side, where they mounted a flight of stairs giving access to a space behind the private boxes which was known as the "box-lounge." Here there were couches and luxurious chairs; but the stage being invisible from it, the place was deserted and they found themselves quite alone. On three sides of the lounge the wall was mirrored from floor to ceiling; on the fourth were the baize-covered doors of the private boxes, each with its closed door.

Tasker was the first to speak—in a hushed undertone that precluded all chance of its being overheard by the occupants of the private boxes. "You seem to take it pretty coolly," he said. "If I were in your shoes I shouldn't feel inclined to chaff."

Simon Hoathley smiled an evil smile. "But, my dear young friend," he replied. "You are in my shoes, or rather your shoes are precisely of the same make and fit as mine. Whatever risks I run are, by the laws of our country, yours also—notwithstanding that I have borne the burden and heat of a particularly sultry time. We are both in it up to the eyes—the part you have already played puts that beyond doubt—and we must sink or swim together. But you need have no apprehension on that head. Have you not just read that the excellent police have discovered a clue?"

The question was accompanied by a wink of the unstable eye, and Tasker, after a puzzled stare at his companion's face, broke into a low whistle of relieved comprehension.

"I think I tumble to the state of affairs," he said with satisfaction. "We must go downstairs and drink to the success of the police presently. But how about the business part of the adventure? It came off all right in your capable hands, I suppose?"

The inquiry caused a quick change to come over Simon Hoathley's demeanour. The forbidding playfulness—the playfulness of the tiger—which he usually affected, left him, and his yellow face puckered with a hundred vexed wrinkles as he replied with a savage snarl:

"Not yet, but it shall—so help me Satan, Tasker, it shall—before a week is past. There was a cursed hitch in the programme—a flaw in the scheme that could not possibly have been provided for—which leaves the best part of the work to be done yet. Listen," and he bent low and whispered half-a-dozen rapid sentences in the other's ear.

The diamond-broker's clerk received the communication with muttered imprecations, and then eyed his companion askance, a look of cunning distrust spreading over his wily features.

"Play fair, old man," he said, "share and share alike, you know—that was the arrangement. You've gone and put it away somewhere. I'm not quite such a flat as to believe that yarn."

Simon Hoathley resumed his light and airy manner, patting Tasker on the shoulder soothingly as he replied:

"What a suspicious youth it is, then—thinking that a pal would be guilty of such conduct as that. Why, you young fool," he added more seriously, "common sense ought to tell you that I am keeping nothing from you. If there were any grounds for your suggestions, don't you see

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that I should have been on my way to foreign parts by this time. What would have been the good of my keeping my appointment with you this afternoon?"

The answer must have been convincing, for Tasker accepted it with a half-grudging apology. "No occasion to cut up rough," he said, "I was only throwing out a feeler—mostly in fun. You are pretty confident, then, that the stuff is all right?"

"It's to be had for the finding and the fetching. I am as certain of it as I am that—that the police have a clue," affirmed Hoathley with an evil grin. "And the beauty of it is that Michael was such a scheming old fox that there is not much risk of our being forestalled, which means that his foxiness will tend to the defeat of his own ends. I intend to wait and see what crops up at the inquest, and then have a regular good go in. As like as not, the place will be shut up and left to itself in a day or two, in which case we shall have a little picnic on the job without fear of interruption. If we didn't see our way clear, I might go in as the new tenant. One thing you can bet your boots on, and that is that Simon Hoathley hasn't taken his last long farewell of Kennett's Cross yet—not by a long chalk."

"Then for the present we pursue a policy of masterly inactivity," said Tasker, "and—read the papers diligently?"

"And read the papers with a special eye for local affairs in the Reading district," assented the elder man. "A good deal may depend on testamentary dispositions, and other contingencies with which I need not trouble a gentleman of your intelligence. We will meet again to-morrow—say at Tamponi's in the evening—and discuss the matter with its further developments, if any."

"Right you are," replied Tasker. "And, that being arranged, let us mingle with the festive throng below, and drink to the success of the police."

They rose together with the intention of going down to the bar on the ground floor, but before they could reach the head of the stairs the latch of one of the private boxes clicked, and a man came out rather hurriedly, turning to give them one keen, comprehensive glance as he preceded them to the stairs. Despite his haste, and firm, well set-up build, he crossed the lounge with a silent, gliding motion that took him out of sight as quickly as though a ghost had flitted by—leaving only the impression of that one piercing look.

"Curious cove, that," remarked Tasker, as they descended the stairs.

"He is all that," replied Hoathley. "Those eyes would give a nervous man the creeps—especially if he was not a righteous man. It is as well we took the precaution of conversing in so low a tone that nobody in the boxes could possibly have overheard us. That gentleman is not at all the sort of person whom I should like to intrust with so much as a sniff of our little secrets. I wonder who he is?"

By this time they had reached the foot of the stairs and were approaching the adjacent bar, round which was grouped the dead-head contingent with sundry additions made since Tasker's defection. The house was very full, every inch of standing space being occupied, and though he had preceded them by but a few steps, the late tenant of the private box had disappeared in the crowd.

"I haven't an idea," replied Tasker to Hoathley's inquiry, "but here is the Fleet Street division mustered in force, and what they don't know isn't worth knowing. I'll bet one of the *Yeller-Feller* boys can tell us. Here, Piffler, did you see a mysterious stranger come down from the boxes in front of us a moment ago? He seems to have done a slope."

"Certainly I did," said the person addressed; "do you call yourself a round-the-towner, Swinley, and don't know that astute practitioner by sight? He is engaged on some case here for the management, I believe, which accounts for his presence in the music hall. The merry song and dance isn't much in his line, I expect, except in the way of business. That is Zambra, the detective—the only man of his trade worth a cent."

The journalist turned again to his associates, and Hoathley, putting his arm through Tasker's, drew the latter aside.

"My young friend," he said, "I know that man by reputation. It is a fortunate thing for the proper solution of the Kennett's Cross mystery that the police, and not he, have the handling of it. If I had to cross swords with Zambra, I might come out on top, but it would be touch and go."

And then they pledged each other, little thinking, amid the lights, the music, and the laughter, that the silent figure who had passed across their view would, ere many days were sped, be intimately bound up with the case which Simon Hoathley desired to bring to a "satisfactory" conclusion.

## CHAPTER VI.

### The Case Against Cuthbert Blakesly.

The events which led to the arrest of Cuthbert Blakesly will be best explained by setting down here the proceedings which took place at the inquest held on the following Monday morning in the great stone-paved kitchen of Kennett's Cross. Before doing so, however, it is necessary briefly to describe the house in which Michael Standridge had taken up his abode.

The building was of red brick with a gaunt, angular gable at each end. The front door, which was reached by a straight garden path from the lane, was in the centre On either side of the front door was the window of a sitting-room, the room on the right being the one in constant use by Michael, while the left-hand room was unfurnished, and was devoted only to the storage of corn for the pony, harness tools, and other odds and ends.

Behind the right-hand sitting-room was the old farmhouse kitchen, dating evidently from the days when it was customary for yeomen to board and lodge their unmarried labourers, and having accommodation for a goodly number. On the other side, behind the unoccupied front room, was a dairy, with one or two smaller rooms originally intended for storing fruit and provisions, but quite unused by Michael.

The stairs leading to the upper regions started on the right of a small square entrance-hall from a point just beyond the door of a living room, and ran up to a first landing, whence a few steps at right angles gave access to the main landing, upon which were the doors of the two principal bedrooms. Here, also, were the entrances to two passages running right and left, by means of which the smaller bedrooms were reached. Michael, in choosing his bedroom, had been faithful to the right-hand side of the house, using the apartment immediately over his living room.

Under the stairs in the hall was a door giving access to a flight of stone steps which led to the cellar. The latter occupied the whole of the space below the kitchen, and had originally consisted of one long under-ground chamber without partition of any kind; but Michael Standridge had made certain alterations in its arrangement, which will be described in the evidence. It is only necessary to say here that those alterations plainly pointed to the object of his amateur brick-making.

Outside, in the rear of the house, the traces of these operations were very noticeable. In the immediate vicinity of the back premises was a good-sized tract of garden ground, uncultivated and overgrown with weeds. This was inclosed on the two sides by a dilapidated post and rail fence, but the extreme end was separated from the Paddock by a new brick wall of recent construction, standing some five feet high. The wall Michael had built himself with the bricks he had left after completing the work in the cellar; and he had been heard to say that he should one

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day or other amuse himself by continuing it round the whole of the garden. The barns and farm-buildings had once stood at the side of the house, but they had long since been removed, with the exception of a single shed which served as a stable for Michael's pony.

Beyond the new brick wall lay the paddock or meadow which had offered to the purchaser of Kennett's Cross his chief attraction in the thick layer of stiff yellow clay which underlay the surface soil. The grass had nearly disappeared and the whole area was cut up from end to end by excavations from which Michael had dug the clay, while all round were strewn the *débris* of damaged bricks and heaps of and unused material.

Such part of the ground as was not covered in this manner was cut up by the tracks of the wheelbarrow in which the bricks had been carried to the house, and in one corner stood the blackened remains of the rude kiln. It was a dreary scene, more suggestive of a suburban estate in process of "development" than of a country homestead, and many had been the inquisitive glances cast from the distant high road at the old miner's efforts to destroy the face of nature.

But on this Monday morning the interest centred on the front of the house where a couple of policemen kept guard at the door to repress the eagerness of those who desired to enter. By ten o'clock the long kitchen was already packed to its fullest capacity, and late comers had either to take their place in an overflow crowd that thronged round the open windows, or wandered about the lane in quest of the latest rumour of what was doing inside.

The coroner had thought fit to hold his court on the scene of the crime—in the first place because there was no public room available in the neighbourhood, and secondly because there were circumstances which made it desirable that the jury should obtain more than a cursory view of the interior of Kennett's Cross. The panel was composed of tradesmen and farmers from surrounding yet distant villages, and very few of them had ever before set foot in the lonely farmhouse—none in the time of its most recent occupant.

The jury, after a solemn visit to the front parlour, whence they returned with very grave faces, had to fight their way back to the long kitchen table through a crowd of witnesses, policemen, and such of the general public as had been able to gain admission.

Pale and restless Cuthbert Blakesly stood at the far end of the room in the custody of the two constables. He was not handcuffed, and every possible consideration was paid to him, but all too plainly he showed traces of the terrible strain of the last two days; or as the reporters put it afterwards, he seemed to feel his position acutely. Contrary to advice, he had insisted on his right to be present and give evidence, and even now, at the eleventh hour, the local solicitor, who had been retained in his interest, was trying to persuade him into silence, but with no effect.

The lawyer's efforts only seemed to irritate him, and to increase his nervous impatience for his turn to come.

After formal evidence of identification had been given the first witness called was William Gannaway, who described himself as a journeyman tailor of Wilmingham, a village two miles away.

He said, in answer to questions by the coroner:

"On the morning of Saturday, the 9th inst.—the day before yesterday—I called here about half-past ten, according to order, to fetch some clothes for repair. I knocked several times at the front door, and not getting any answer I began to think that the gentleman was out, and had forgotten the appointment. I was turning to go away when I noticed that the brass knob of the door was smeared with a dark red stain. This set me thinking, and I went to the parlour window to see if anybody was about. Then for the first time I saw that the blind was down, and that I could get no view of the inside of the room. What with the stain on the door handle, and the blind being down at that hour of the day, things seemed so queer that I returned to Wilmingham as quickly as I could to tell the policeman. On the way I met Constable Wheeler, and came back with him. At his request, however, I remained outside while he went into the house."

David Wheeler, police constable, stationed at Wilmingham, was then sworn, and deposed as follows:

"Owing to the communication made to me by the last witness, I proceeded to Kennett's Cross on Saturday morning at eleven o'clock. The door handle was stained with what looked like blood, and the blind of the right-hand sitting room was down. I managed to open the front door without disturbing the stain. The door was not locked or bolted in any way—merely closed. I saw nothing remarkable in the hall, but on entering the right-hand parlour, I found the body of the deceased lying just within the doorway. I drew up the blind, and then recognized the body as that of the owner of the house, whom I knew very well by sight. He was quite dead and cold, and there was much blood about, which seemed to come from a wound behind the shoulder blade. I sent the last witness, Gannaway, to Wilmingham, with instructions to telegraph to the Superintendent, and I remained on the premises till he arrived."

Mr. Gunning, the Superintendent of the County Police, stationed at Reading, then gave evidence.

"On receipt of a telegram to the effect that Mr. Wilson —or Standridge, as I understand is his right name—had been found dead, I proceeded to this house, taking with me Inspector Dimmock and a constable. Before starting, I notified Dr. Carstairs, the police surgeon, and the doctor was on the spot almost as soon as we were. On arrival I was met by Constable Wheeler, who pointed out the stain on the door handle. He also informed me that he had not moved the body, and that nothing had been touched but the window blind. I proceeded to the front sitting-room, and there saw the deceased lying face downwards on the floor, about two paces inside the doorway. I left him in the hands of the doctor, and with the assistance of Inspector Dimmock, made a thorough examination of the premises. We could discover no signs of a forcible entry, nor were there any marks of a struggle. The room over the parlour is furnished as a bedroom, but the bed had not been slept in the previous night. On the table in the sitting-room there were a decanter of whisky more than half full, a jug of water and two glasses. On the mantelpiece was a box of cigars, and there were several stumps of cigars lying in the empty grate. The other bedrooms were unfurnished and quite empty, and the sitting-room opposite that, where the body was found, had only been used as a lumber room."

"You next explored the cellar, I think?" asked the coroner, amid a craning of necks and shuffling of feet, which showed the interest aroused by the question.

"I did," proceeded the superintendent. "The cellar itself was quite empty, but about nine feet of the far end had been cut off by a new brick wall built from floor to ceiling. In the centre of this wall was an iron door, such as is used in bankers' and jewellers' strong rooms. The place was, in fact, a strong room, and I may say that we fully expected to find something of the kind. The rumours of the deceased's doings in this direction have been notorious for some time."

"Was the strong room locked?" asked the coroner.

"It was," said Mr. Gunning, "and the lock was a very powerful and complicated one. It was quite impossible to open it without the proper key; and knowing that the deceased had banked with the Metropolitan and Counties at Reading, I sent a constable to Mr. Oakley, the manager, to see if he could throw any light on the matter. Being Saturday, the bank had closed when the constable called, but he found the manager at his private residence. Mr. Oakley came out to Kennett's Cross at once, bringing with him a letter intrusted to him under the circumstances which he will himself describe. The letter, which was marked, 'To be opened only in the event of my death,'

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disclosed the whereabouts of the missing key. I produce the letter."

The document in question consisted of only a few lines, which the coroner read out as follows:

"I have concealed the key of the strong room in the small back bedroom at the east end of the house. Raise the fourth plank from the fireplace."

The letter was dated 16th March—three days after the purchase of the iron door, as it was afterwards proved.

"On searching the spot indicated," continued the Superintendent, "I found the key hidden in the flooring. Accompanied by Inspector Dimmock and by Mr. Oakley, I then returned to the cellar and opened the strong room. The partition wall in which the door was set was of great thickness, and the original walls of the cellar inside the chamber had been lined with fresh bricks to the depth of a foot. At the further end of the strong room was a wooden shelf, on which lay fourteen brown-paper sovereign bags, bearing the rubber stamp of the Metropolitan and Counties Bank at Reading. The bags were empty, and there was no money or any other valuables in the strong room."

The audience shuffled and whispered again on hearing the implied suggestion that a robbery had been committed. Evidently, the Kennett's Cross tragedy was to lack no details that could add to the popular excitement, and excitement was a rare luxury to the Berkshire rustics.

The Superintendent, after adding that he had then dispatched Detective-Inspector Dimmock to make inquiries, stepped down, and his place was taken by Dr. Carstairs, who briefly but clearly described the nature of the fatal wound that had been inflicted on the deceased. It was a long, clean stab, that must have been struck from behind, entering below the left blade-bone and penetrating to the heart. Death must have been quite instantaneous. From the position of the body and the angle at which the blow was struck, it was nearly certain that both the deceased and his assailant were standing up at the time. It was about two o'clock on Saturday when he first saw the body, and in his opinion life had been then extinct quite twelve hours—it might be more, but it could not be less. Any idea of suicide or accident was absolutely out of the question in the case. The weapon with which the deed was done must have been both heavy and sharp, and it had not been found.

The next witness called was John Perkins, a farm labourer. He said, in answer to questions:

"I work at Langston's farm, half-way betwixt here and Reading, on the main road. About ten o'clock on Friday evening Farmer Langston sent for me to come and help put out some furze that had caught fire on the road-side close to the rick-yard. I was busy there with my mates beating out the fire till half-past eleven. A little before that time, as I was standing close to the road, a gent came along on a bicycle, going towards Reading. He sang out to know what was up, and I told him. He didn't stop, but I had a good look at him by the light of the burning furze. That's the gent, over there," he added, pointing to where Cuthbert Blakesly was standing.

Langston, the farmer near whose premises the fire had occurred, also testified to having seen a young man pass on a bicycle coming from the direction of Kennett's Cross at the hour named. He could not, however, positively swear that the prisoner was the man.

Detective-Inspector Dimmock was then called, and made the following statement:

"In consequence of a communication made by the last witness, and of other information received, I went on Saturday afternoon to 3 Woodstock Villas, Reading, where the prisoner Blakesly lodges. He was out, but in a shed in the garden I saw a bicycle, which I was told belonged to him. The machine had evidently been put away just as it returned from a journey, without being cleaned. On the woodwork of the right-hand handle I found several smears which looked like blood. There was also a congealed drop on the nickel-plated bell which had the same appearance.


# STARVED, NOT MAD.

When King Lear is forsaken by his two ungrateful daughters, Goneril and Regan, and is deserted by all save his jester and the Duke of Kent, he goes stark mad; he thinks that he is king again, and he stalks over the desolate heath wearing a rude crown of wisps of straw.

In G. R. Sims' "Christmas Day in the Workhouse," starved "Nancy" raved, until, says the pauper, "She talked like the bonnie lassie I wooed on the Devon shore." Quite a different form of starvation caused Mrs. A. M. Sharp, Moat Cottages, Fordwich, near Canterbury, to write these lines:—

"At times, in truth, I was really light-headed, if not quite mad, and did the most extraordinary things." Let us begin at the beginning, and come to the madness. "Until I was 24 years old my health was generally good. I married when I was between 22 and 23, and two months after the birth of my little girl all life, energy, and ambition seemed to go out of me.

"I could only relish a little potato with gravy or butter, and I grew so thin that folks thought I was in a decline. My food seemed to stop in my throat, and it made me feel bad in the chest." Mrs. Sharp's heart was next attacked. "A cruel, suffocating sensation seized me," she says; "my heart palpitated so that I could scarcely draw my breath. Many are the nights that, before I tried Mother Seigel's Syrup, I have gone to bed with a dreadful feeling that something terrible was going to happen.

"I used to wake with a start—gasping and fighting for breath. I was terrified at being left alone. Perspiration, from fear, would run off me, and fits of shivering used to seize me. I thought I had heart disease, and altogether I consulted five doctors. In spite of that, I went from bad to worse. One day my husband came home and said that a man had advised him to try Seigel's Curative Syrup, so we got a bottle.

"At the third bottle there was no mistaking my progress. The heart depression was less, the appetite improved, and I enjoyed my meals. With Seigel's Syrup health and strength gradually returned, and I began to again get stout and jolly. —Dec. 20th, 1900."

(1) What made Mrs. Sharp think that she was stark mad and in a decline? (2) Why are there at least a dozen empty Seigel's bottles now in the house? (1) Because the brain and the blood corpuscles of the body were shockingly starved by bad Indigestion. (2) Because Seigel's Syrup keeps the stomach clear of impediments to digestion, and acts as a tonic.

King Lear's madness may be traceable to shock, but there are lesser and more numerous head and brain disorders traceable only to the human stomach.


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I reported what I had found to Mr. Superintendent Gunning, who then decided to arrest Mr. Blakesly. I was present at his apprehension in the garden of 'The Limes.' I conveyed the prisoner to Reading, and afterwards searched his rooms, where I found a pair of shirt-cuffs (produced) stained with blood, and also a pocket-handkerchief in the same condition. The prisoner was taken before a magistrate on Saturday evening and was remanded for a week."

Cuthbert's solicitor put one question in cross-examination to this witness.

"Were the cuffs and handkerchief concealed, or were they in such a place as they might have been expected to be found in, had the stains not been the result of a crime?" he asked.

"The articles were with the rest of his soiled linen," was the reply.

The evidence of the inspector clearly made a great impression on the jury and on the audience. It sounded the first note of something tangible in the case, and showed that the police had more definite grounds for the arrest than had been hitherto supposed. Till the inspector told of the bloodstained linen and the smears on the bicycle, the popular supposition was that the police had acted hastily on the strength of Blakesly's known intimacy with the dead man, and of his proved presence in the neighbourhood on the night of the murder.

Both these grounds for suspicion might be capable of explanation, but now in the tell-tale stains an element had been introduced into the charge, which it would not be so easy to refute. The glances of pity and sympathy which had hitherto been directed at the young man became fewer, and looks of horror and astonishment began to take their place.

But, as yet, there was one point which was puzzling the spectators sorely. How had the robbery been effected? The strong room had been found empty, but it was also locked, and the lock was untampered with. It must, therefore, have been opened with the key, and yet the key was discovered in the original hiding place devised by its owner—a hiding place of which the only record was to be found in the letter which he had deposited at the bank in the event of emergencies. It was known that he must have been possessed of between fourteen and fifteen thousand pounds in gold, and yet this large sum had vanished without a trace, while the stronghold, which had been without doubt specially constructed for its preservation, was intact and its key hidden.

The next witness called was Mr. Oakley, the manager of the Metropolitan and Counties Bank, and almost the first question put to him showed that he was there for the purpose of throwing light on this all important point.

The bank manager was a quiet, business-like man of fifty, but his natural self-possession seemed for the moment to be shaken. He clearly appreciated the significance of the evidence he was called upon to give.

"With reference to this letter describing the position of the key of the strong room," asked the coroner, "will you be good enough to tell us when it reached you?"

"It was placed in my hands on the day of its date—March 15th," was the reply.

"It is written on paper bearing the bank's heading, and is inclosed in one of the bank's envelopes, is it not?"

"That is so."

"The presumption being that it was written by the deceased at the counter of the bank on materials which he had obtained from one of the clerks?"

"I was given to understand that such was the case."

"Now, will you please state the exact circumstances under which the letter reached you, and whether you noticed anything peculiar in its condition at the time?"

"The letter was brought to me in my private room," replied Mr. Oakley, "with an intimation that Mr. Wilson—as he was then known—desired me to take care of it, and only open it in the event of his death. I was about to put it away in the safe, with another document previously received from him, when I saw that the flap of the envelope had not been properly stuck down. The mucilage was still wet as though the ineffectual attempt to fasten it had only just been made. I completed the fastening, without, of course, withdrawing the letter, and put it away in the safe."

"From what you say, it would have been quite possible for the person who carried the letter from the counter to your private room to have mastered the contents on the way?"

"The letter being practically an open one there would have been no difficulty in his doing so," was the reply.

"And who was it," asked the coroner, amid an awe-stricken hush, "who brought you that letter?"

The manager's reply came in tones which showed how deeply he felt the fatal nature of the blow he was compelled to strike.

"My cashier, Mr. Blakesly," he said.

## CHAPTER VII.

### The Prisoner's Story.

There was dead silence for nearly a minute after the manager's last answer.

The justification of the police in arresting the young cashier was now complete; the strength of the chain that bound him seemed unbreakable, and the prevailing sentiment was one of wonder that public opinion should have been so much at fault in forming an estimate of Cuthbert Blakesly's character.

He had always been regarded as a "good fellow" all round, frank and trustworthy above all things, and certainly the last man in the world to stab his friend from behind for the sake of gold. But freely accorded doubt had to yield to unwelcome certainty. The late bicycle journey, the blood stains, the empty strong room, which could only have been opened by one knowing where the key lay hid, the proof that young Blakesly alone, with the exception of the manager, could have had that knowledge—all these points taken collectively formed an array of circumstantial evidence that fitted together with convincing nicety.

A further question elicited the fact that the prisoner necessarily was aware that the deceased had regularly been withdrawing large amounts in gold, and Mr. Oakley's examination was brought to an end. The coroner at once said:

"That, gentlemen, is the whole of the evidence I had proposed to lay before you—I may say that in Mr. Blakesly's interest it is all the evidence I should have wished to lay before you, for as he is already charged by the police your verdict can make but little difference to him. I understand, however, that he insists on his right to be called, and I am bound to receive his evidence."

Cuthbert had already pressed forward to the end of the table, followed by his attendant policemen, and was waiting to be sworn. Well he knew that in this humble court alone would he have the privilege of telling his story with his own lips, and his eagerness to begin was painful to behold. Was it to be a refutation or a halting excuse, the people wondered.

He took the oath impatiently, and was opening his mouth to speak when the coroner interrupted him. "It is my duty to tell you, Mr. Blakesly," he said, "that you are not bound to say anything which may incriminate yourself—in fact, in order to avoid asking you questions which you might decline to answer, I shall allow you simply to give us your version of the affair in your own way. At the same time I must warn you that if you say anything now that is capable of disproof it will seriously damage your defence hereafter."

The prisoner chafed visibly during the interruption.

"I am not here to pick and choose what I shall say," he began hotly. "I have come here to tell all I know—and it

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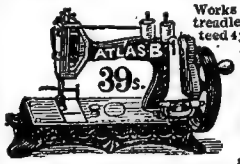


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is little enough—in the hope that in defending myself I may incriminate the guilty, for, before Heaven, I am innocent of this dastardly deed. Some fiendish combination of circumstances must have pursued me, for every word of the evidence that has been brought is true—as true as the deductions from it are false. It is true that I was at Kennett's Cross on Friday night; true that, when I started to return home, I was stained with blood; true also that, if the letter describing the position of the key was, as Mr. Oakley says, unfastened, I had an opportunity of reading it—and yet, in the face of all these truths, I am innocent of killing Michael Standridge, and innocent of robbing him. More than that, I did not even know he was dead till the police arrested me; and, as for the key, I was ignorant of its existence till it was mentioned in court an hour ago. I am not in the habit of peering into private letters."

He paused for a moment, then went on more calmly:

"All this is mere assertion, and I had better detail facts. On Friday afternoon, by the two o'clock delivery, I received a letter from Mr. Standridge asking me to come out to Kennett's Cross the same evening and confer with him on a matter of importance. The letter ended with a request that I would mention my visit to no one, either before or afterwards, and asked that for the purpose of preserving secrecy I would destroy the letter as soon as read. As I obeyed the injunction and tore the letter up immediately, I am unable to produce it, but that was the gist of the communication, except that nine o'clock was appointed for the time of my call. I may mention here that the injunction to secrecy in the letter was the sole reason why I had abstained from mentioning my journey hither previous to my arrest. Of course, I can easily see how that silence must tell against me.

"I was somewhat surprised at the invitation, for, though I had been on very good terms with Mr Standridge since he became a customer of the bank, I know that he had some objection to receiving visitors at Kennett's Cross. There was, however, one matter of a private nature, which I do not care to allude to here, about which he might wish to see me, and I decided at once to keep the appointment. It was a fine evening, and I left Reading on my bicycle at eight making the run in a little under the hour. I dismounted at the garden gate, and leaving the bicycle against the fence I walked up the path and knocked at the front door. The blind of the sitting-room was down but I could see that there was a light in the room, and immediately after my knock a shadow passed across the blind.

"I thought that Mr. Standridge had risen to come and open the front door, but instead of that I heard steps receding up the stairs. Almost directly the right hand bedroom window was raised, and Mr. Standridge called down, 'Who is it?' I answered, giving my name, and the deceased then came down and opened the door. 'It's you, then,' he said. 'Well, come in; I don't receive visitors as a rule, but I'll make an exception in your favour; I've been looking for a chance of a quiet chat with you.' After carefully closing and locking the house door, he led the way into the sitting-room, and bade me make myself comfortable. He produced the spirits and cigars which were mentioned this morning, and we sat smoking and talking for a long while—quite a couple of hours, I should say, though I took no particular note of the time. Somewhat to my surprise, Mr. Standridge did not broach the subject which I had imagined to be the cause of his invitation, nor did he allude to the invitation itself. I, therefore, towards the end of my stay, introduced it myself, and I wish to say frankly that we were not in perfect accord on this matter. There was nothing of the nature of an unpleasantness, but he gave me to understand very decidedly that he was not yet prepared to meet my views, and that——"

Here the coroner interposed again:

"We all quite appreciate your delicacy," he said, "in not alluding to the subject of your conversation with the deceased, but I am told there exists a well-founded impression as to what it was. In such a serious case you would do well to be explicit, in order to prevent a wrongful, and possibly too harsh, construction being put upon your disagreement. Rumour says that you have been paying your addresses to the young lady who has recently been acknowledged by the deceased as his daughter. Do you allege that you talked on nothing more contentious than Mr. Standridge's consent to your union?"

A look of annoyance passed over Cuthbert's face and he restrained his anger with obvious difficulty.

"I had hoped," he said "that her name might have been kept out of the case entirely, but as the gossips seem to have fastened on it already, I may as well confirm your surmise. I have been engaged to Miss Standridge for two years, and when her father appeared I was naturally anxious to obtain his countenance and consent. The position he took up was that he would like to know me a little better before sanctioning a marriage. He did not by any means give me a definite refusal; he merely stipulated for time, and I, not unnaturally, took a contrary view, especially as he had questioned me very fully during the early part of the evening on my family history and prospects.

"In spite of our difference we remained the best of friends; and when at last I got up to go Mr. Standridge accompanied me to the door. There were two bolts—top and bottom—a heavy chain, and an ordinary lock, all of which he had to unfasten before he could let me out. I was in complete ignorance of the strong room, and not a word had been said by either of us about his property, but seeing the precautions he took to guard his house, I could not help thinking of the gold withdrawals.

"When at length the door was opened, we stood a few moments saying our last words, Mr. Standridge being good-naturedly anxious that I should not be disheartend by what he had said.

"It was fine and starlight; but there was no moon, so that objects at a little distance were very indistinctly seen. Suddenly, just as we were about to part—I to go down the path to my bicycle, and the deceased to re-enter the house—we heard a scuffling sound at the gate, and then a horrible—almost human—screech, three or four times repeated.

"I ran down the path, followed more slowly by Mr. Standridge who seemed to leave the door with some reluctance.

"Outside the gate in the road I found a half-grown cat with its two hind legs nearly severed by a steel trap, which it had dragged after it from the spot where it had been caught.

"By the time I had released the animal, Mr. Standridge came up, and we both decided, as it was so terribly lacerated, to put the cat out its misery at once, and I did so by dashing its head against the fence.

"The deceased then hurried back to the house, taking the trap with him, and telling me to leave the body by the road-side, so that he could bury it in the morning.

"Before he finally shouted 'Good night,' he expressed his intention of trying to find the owner of the cat, and also who had set the trap. It must have come from a distance, he said, as there were no houses near.

"As I got on to my bicycle I heard the slamming of the house door and the clatter of the chain and bolts being shot into position, and then I started straight away on the return journey.

"When I reached my lodgings I placed the bicycle in the shed, and, letting myself in with the latch-key, went up to my bedroom. It was then that I realised for the first time what a mess I was in owing to the incident of the cat. I had wiped my hands on my handkerchief, and not only that, but my cuffs were stained with the blood.

*(To be continued.)*

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## THE EDITOR'S PAGE.

There is without doubt a good deal of eccentricity in the world, and judging from the post-cards I have received in connection with the "Peculiar People" competition, Scotland in this connection seems to lead the van, as it does in many other things. This is no reflection on the Land o' Cakes.

Unconventionality in dress or conduct very often (not always) implies originality of ideas and independence of opinion, two attributes not to be altogether despised.

Among the postcards sent in have been many which bear evidence of being written out of personal feeling. Thus, one Northampton shop-assistant thinks his employer the most eccentric man in the world because he recently refused to raise his salary. Quite a number of girls comment on the extraordinary characters of their lovers, who are, it would appear, lukewarm in their demonstrations of affection. "We have been engaged eighteen months, and my sweetheart has only kissed me three times," says one Chester damsel, which I quite agree betokens unwarrantable neglect on the part of the young man.

❦❦❦

The prize in this competition has been awarded to—

Mr. W. J. Ormiston,
Cameronian Cottage,
Brynhyfryd,
Swansea,

for the following:

Ronald Macmillan was, a few years ago, and may be still, a well-known figure in Inverness. His sole idea in life was to obtain recruits for the British army, and in this laudable search for food for powder, he roamed the streets of Inverness at all hours. Many and many a recruit did Ronald capture and take to the barracks, but alas! not one was ever accepted by the military authorities, for Ronald's recruits were always ragged youths and street urchins.

Ronald's garb was always that of Old Gaul. His kilt and plaid were of Cameron tartan, as became an Inverness man, for that ancient city is the depôt of the Cameron Highlanders. His glengarry, sometimes minus its tail ribbons, was never without half-a-dozen adorning feathers, and his faded scarlet tunic was brightened with a row of medals that would have put Hector Macdonald's collection into the shade had they been real, but Ronald's were of tin. A stout staff and a huge butcher's dirk completed Ronald's costume. These weapons were useful when the boys became too pressing in their attentions to Ronald as he paraded the streets in quest of recruits.

W. J. O.

❦❦❦

In addition I have decided to award stereoscopes to the following, as consolation prizes. Their efforts are printed below:

Mr. G. Stewart, Belgrave House, Littlehampton; Mr. Eric Murdoch, 8 West Adam Street, Edinburgh; Mr. E. C. Lempriere, 22 Seymour Road, Harringay, N.; Mr. J. Johnston, 32 Great Hamilton Street, Paisley, N.B.; Mr. H. E. Luck, 19 Cleveland Street, Chichester; Mr. A. R. Hutton, 2 Lapage Street, Bradford, Yorks.

About the most peculiar person I ever heard of is the "old miller of Highdown." He lived all his life on the top of a hill over Worthing, and was seldom seen by anybody. It is said he did all his work during the night and slept during the day. He was exceedingly eccentric, and had his coffin kept under his bed on wheels, and every day he would drag it out and put his clothes in it. But the most peculiar ideas of this gentleman are particularly funny: he requested that he should be put straight into his coffin directly he was dead, and buried upside down, as he always said, that when the world came to an end, it would turn upside down, and then he would be on his feet. This was fully carried out, and his grave (a large square stone railed in) can now be seen on the side of Highdown Hill, under some trees which he is supposed to have planted himself.

G. S.

❦❦❦

"Mousey Fiddle," as he is locally nicknamed, makes a living by killing mice, and his methods are "peculiarly" peculiar. Everybody knows that mice are particularly fond of music, especially the fiddle. Now, wherever these pests become numerous and destructive, "Mousey Fiddle's" services are called into requisition. Night is the time he generally goes to battle. He plants himself near the mice runs, strikes up with his mouth some lively tune, and at intervals puts in the squeaking twitter peculiar to mice. In a short time the mice are running from their hiding-places as if drawn by a loadstone, and "Mousey Fiddle" is literally surrounded. His patent destructive powder does the rest. By way of versatility he can execute a step dance, an Irish jig, or a Scottish sword dance by the use of two of his left hand fingers.

E. M.

❦❦❦

The queerest man I ever met was Frederick W. Jones,
In height six feet, he always spoke in high falsetto tones;
Six fingers had he on each hand, six toes upon each foot,
And though his beard was white as snow, his hair was black as soot.
When stirred by anger, he would move his scalp and ears, and crack
His finger-joints unceasingly, and bend his digits back.
A strange accomplishment had he—he'd place upon the tip
Of his snub nose a penny, and remove it with his lip.
In life he never told the truth, if he a lie could frame.
Though in his grave he lies quite still he still lies all the same.

E. C. L.

In the West of Scotland a race meeting, market, or fair, was not complete without Heather Jock. With his green swallow-tailed coat, with 365 buttons, made of different kinds of metal; his crown made of heather, with fifty-two small bells; his knee-breeches, with twelve pearl buttons, denoting the number of months, weeks and days of the year, he would dance and sing, to the great amusement of the youngsters, not forgetting some of the oldsters.

J. J.

❦❦❦

Possibly a number of the Border readers of *Short Stories* will remember the gentleman who is referred to in the following—a well-known landowner in the South of Scotland. He had one peculiarity, with regard to which he was parsimony personified—the humble but necessary necktie.

One day one of his tenants, George Ransome, called on him about some fencing on his farm which had got into a bad state, but to all his arguments the laird proved obdurate.

"Well, sir," said the wily George at length, "we'll let that lie. By the way, I was north to Edinburgh the other day, and got some very bonny neckties. Would you do me the honour of accepting two or three?"

"Man, Ransome," said the laird, "that's far too good of you, but—well, yes, I'll take them, thank you."

"I'll send them over to-morrow," said George, "and I think that's all my business to-day. Good morning, sir."

"Wait a minute, George," said the laird. "About that fencing—is it really so bad?"

"Oh, it might be worse," was the answer. "I believe it'll do a bit yet."

"But we canna hae things gaun wrang," said the laird, dropping into the Doric, as he did when well pleased. "I'll send a man to see aboot it the morn."

And he did.

A. R. H.

❦❦❦

The most peculiar man I know is a gentleman of independent means living on the Sussex coast.

The first thing every morning, no matter the weather, he walks on to the beach carrying a tumbler half full of whisky, which he fills up with sea-water gathered in a glass beaker.

This mixture of sea-water and whisky he drinks then and there with a great gusto. He ascribes all manner of medicinal virtues to this peculiar drink, and certainly he is the picture of health.

The same individual also soaks his tobacco with sea water, and redries it before he considers the weed is fit to smoke.

L. H. E.


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Printed by Horace Cox, Bream's Buildings, London, E.C., and published by C. Arthur Pearson Ltd., Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.

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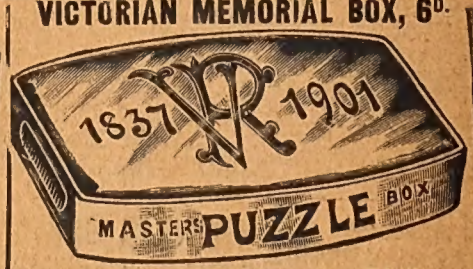

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